

# kennesawor

## Interview with Deane Thompson Bonner

Item Type	image;text
Authors	Scott, Thomas Allan (1943- )
Citation	Interview with Deane Thompson Bonner, 2009-09-03, Cobb NAACP/Civil Rights series, 2009-2010, Kennesaw State University Oral History Project, 1973- , KSU/45/05/001, Kennesaw State University Archives.
Rights	The digital reproductions on this site are provided for research consultation and scholarly purposes only. To request permission to publish, reproduce, publicly display, broadcast, or distribute this material in any format outside of fair use please contact the Kennesaw State University Archives.
Download date	2026-05-08 11:14:20
Link to Item	<a href="https://soar.kennesaw.edu/handle/11360/6953">https://soar.kennesaw.edu/handle/11360/6953</a>

**KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

***HISTORY OF THE COBB COUNTY BRANCH OF THE NAACP AND CIVIL RIGHTS  
ACTIVITIES IN COBB COUNTY, GEORGIA***

**AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE HIST 4425 (ORAL HISTORY) CLASS AT  
KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY, FALL SEMESTER 2009**

**INTERVIEW WITH DEANE THOMPSON BONNER**

**COBB NAACP/CIVIL RIGHTS SERIES, NO. 1**

**CONDUCTED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT AND THE HIST 4425 CLASS**

**THURSDAY, 3 SEPTEMBER 2009**

Kennesaw State University Oral History Project  
Cobb NAACP/Civil Rights Series, No. 1  
Interview with Deane Thompson Bonner  
Conducted by Thomas A. Scott and the HIST 4425 class  
Thursday, 3 September 2009  
Location: Social Sciences 2027, Kennesaw State University

TOM SCOTT: The interview today is with Ms. Deane Bonner, who is the president of the Cobb County Branch of the NAACP. This is for a class project in History 4425 at Kennesaw State on the history of the Cobb County Branch of the NAACP and civil rights activities in this area. Ms. Bonner, I wonder if I could begin with an opening question of the type that we're going to ask everybody; so, if you would, talk a bit about your background, where you grew up and maybe about your family and so on and the community that you were in. Just give us a little idea of the kind of place where you grew up.

DEANE BONNER: I grew up in Weirton, West Virginia, which is the northern part, steel mills. You can gather at the time that I went to school I went to a segregated school. My whole schooling from first to twelfth grade was an all-black school. I really liked it because we had teachers that made us realize who we were at that particular time in the country. I had African American role models. I knew who W. E. B. Du Bois was. I knew who invented the cotton gin. So going to an all-black school in Weirton, West Virginia, back in the early 1950s was something that probably gave me a foundation for who I am today.

Currently we've been here in Cobb County, Marietta, for thirty-five years. My husband is retired military, [and] we came here when he was doing his last stint with the U.S. Air Force. He was out at Dobbins. We came here with two children, one seven and one nine. Since then I now have seven grandchildren. My son went to Piedmont College in north Georgia, and my daughter went to Albany State in south Georgia.

TS: Okay. I wonder if I can back up a bit and ask you about Weirton.

DB: It's Weirton, West Virginia. It's right in that panhandle up there between Ohio and Pennsylvania. I'm sure these students know that. Where I lived, three miles I would be in Ohio, thirty-six miles I would be in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

TS: So there might have been a larger black community than West Virginia as a whole, would you say or was there a large black community or a small one?

DB: It was a small African-American community, actually, in Weirton, but one of the strangest things about Weirton and growing up there, we all lived in that valley together, I mean, black, white, all of us lived there. As I grew up, some of my playmates were white kids. They still went to their school, and I went to mine, but when I would get out of school, we would come home and play. Based on that time and place they went to their school and we went to ours. Our school was a one-story building that had the first through the twelfth grades in the same building. We all were right in the same building

whereas the white high school was very big. It's interesting as I think back. My mom is over ninety years old, and she's still in Weirton, so I have to go into Pittsburgh to get home. A lot of the kids that I grew up with may be in some political position in Weirton, West Virginia. I wouldn't ever have to worry about a ticket or getting thrown in jail because we were neighbors when we were not in school.

TS: Are you talking about the white kids that might be on the police force?

DB: Yes.

TS: Let me just ask you, did you ever reflect on this at all when you were growing up? Did you think, I wish I could go to that white school or this is a great injustice? Did you think it was strange at all that they went to one school and you went to another?

DB: Not really because the first love that I ever had was my English teacher. If you'll notice, Tom, I have good penmanship. She used to always tell me about how great I wrote. We had teachers that gave us a sense of we could still be all that we want to be, even though we were in segregated schools. Even when I look at my grandkids now, I know that they don't know who Eli Whitney was, I do, who invented the cotton gin. That's interesting. The only thing that probably bothered me in Weirton, and I left there at an early age, I knew that I would never be able to get the job that I wanted. At that particular time I knew that I couldn't even be a clerk in the Five and Ten [Store], but I knew that I was smart. I took tests, and I would pass, so that tells you I had some sense, not that that meant anything to anybody but me. My father only had a third grade education. There were six of us in our family and we never went hungry. We had a lot of beans but still....

TS: What did he do for a living?

DB: He worked at Weirton Steel for thirty-seven years.

TS: What kind of job did he do?

DB: So you know, they were building steel a lot better in this country then, and Weirton was one of the leading places where you were getting steel from. He was just a regular laborer. We could walk in Weirton where he worked; we walked up and down because we didn't have a car. My father would be working in the steel mill, and we could go past and just say "hi" to him.

TS: Was the work force integrated in the steel mill?

DB: Well, as long as I was there I never knew of any African American that was other than a laborer. My father was always able to provide for his six kids.

TS: Were all the laborers black?

DB: No. There were poor white people there too. It was still a system of whoever was in power. There still had to be an underclass, and they were not only us. It was poor whites also.

TS: Did you consider yourself poor when you were growing up?

DB: Not really. I always had shoes. I always had clothes. So I really didn't see myself as poor. The principal of Dunbar High School was a Morehouse graduate, and he instilled in us values. He was just like a second father because when you went to that school, you could not do a lot of horsing around. You're going to have kids horsing around and all that, but I look at some of the things that my grandkids get away with, and that could have never happened in our school.

TS: It sounds like you've been talking about strong mentorship inside the school, the teachers and the principal. Could you elaborate a little bit more? You said you learned about W. E. B. Du Bois, for instance, and so did they do a lot of black history in the school? I think you said earlier they told you were just as good as anybody else and that sort of thing. Was it a nurturing atmosphere in the school or were they really tough or how would you describe it?

DB: Nurturing, very much so, because to tell you the truth, Dr. Scott, I think most of my learning was about African Americans. I mean, I didn't learn about Columbus discovering America. That was at that particular time to us not very perceivable, due to the fact that they came over here, and the Indians were here when they got here.

TS: You really didn't believe Columbus "discovered" it because people were already here.

DB: Right.

TS: And they taught you that in school?

DB: Oh, they taught us that. So, all of it was African American history. We had a school of all black teachers and all black kids, and all they taught us was who we were. Very, very empowering too as I look back on it now. As we advocate in today I think that our kids lose a lot when they don't learn that you were more than coming over here on slave ships. You made contributions to this country.

TS: Did your mother work outside the home?

DB: Yes, my mother worked outside of the home. My mother was a maid. My mother worked at the banker's [home]. There was an area in Weirton that was called Marlin Heights, and the only people who lived on Marlin Heights were, of course, white people. My mom worked there to clean their house, take care of their kids, and brought us their hand me down clothes that I couldn't wait to get because they were just bringing me beautiful clothes that the kids didn't want to wear any more. So, yes, she worked.

TS: So you were probably a lot better off than a lot of other black families in Weirton weren't you?

DB: We were all probably about on the same because all of our parents worked in the mill. One interesting story about Weirton is my mom worked for the president of the local bank in Weirton, and when my father decided he wanted to buy a house the banker wouldn't qualify the loan.

TS: He would not qualify the loan?

DB: He said, "No Minnie, you know we can't do that"—my mom's name's Minnie—"you know we can't let you buy a house."

TS: So she's Minnie Thompson.

DB: Minnie Thompson, yes.

TS: Well how did that....

DB: Well two years later I left Weirton. I knew at thirteen I would leave and get a job anywhere, so I left after I graduated at seventeen and went to New Jersey where my father had a sister. We helped my mom buy the house that she currently lives in.

TS: Oh, really?

DB: Yes.

TS: So where did you get the loan for the house that she currently lives in?

DB: No, we came up with the money.

TS: Oh you paid the whole amount.

DB: No, no we didn't pay the whole amount. All we had to do was have the down payment and then once we had the down payment . . .

TS: Okay so when the banker . . .

DB: The banker was saying, "Minnie you need to wait. You do not need to buy a house now. Louis is just working in the mill, and you all need to just stay where you are."

TS: So your father's name was Lewis?

DB: Yes.

TS: Did the mill own the housing that you lived in at that time?

- DB: No, they were people who lived up on Marlin Heights. They were people that didn't live in our neighborhood, but they owned those houses that we all lived in.
- TS: How did your parents feel about it when the banker for whom your mother worked turns them down?
- DB: To be honest about it, I don't think they knew that it was wrong. His explanation to my mom was we would not be able to maintain the payments. "Louis works in the mill and he only makes blah, blah, blah; you've got to feed this and that, so there is no..." That's an interesting scenario.
- TS: You know by the time that you're thirteen you want to get out of there, so you must not have been totally happy with that community.
- DB: Oh, I was never the norm even under those circumstances because I would go in a store where they told me not to go, and I would go anyway.
- TS: Really?
- DB: Oh, yes. My neighbor had a cherry tree, and she just had these great cherries, but she didn't want us to touch them. We're living right next door to each other. I live here and they live there, and here's this cherry tree. I would go over there and get her cherries. I would just go over there and pick the cherries. She'd get so mad. "I'll tell your mother, you don't do that." I'd just look right at her and, because she was sort of old and couldn't run, I would just do it.
- TS: You talk about going in the stores where you weren't supposed to. Could you explain that a little bit?
- DB: Yes. I'm over seventy years old. So back then there were places you couldn't go or buy stuff even when you had the money.
- TS: Like in a department store?
- DB: Yes, like in a department store. You certainly couldn't try on the things and all of that. But we had places, Isaly's—anybody ever heard of Isaly's—it was an ice cream store. It was a nice little change back from when I was growing up.
- TS: That was one of the places you couldn't.
- DB: Yes, one of the places where they didn't even want to sell you ice cream, and I would just stand there and look ugly until they sold it to me.
- TS: In a lot of places like the Dairy Queen there would be a side window for African Americans. It wasn't like that?

DB: No, no, we could go into the store, but they just didn't want to sell to you. You're talking about a kid wondering why. My dad gave me this quarter which we'd get every pay day when he got paid on Thursday, and you don't want to sell me this five-cent ice cream. Why?

TS: Good question.

DB: So they didn't want to see Minnie Thompson's daughter come anyway.

TS: Is that the way you were known as Minnie Thompson's daughter?

DB: Yes, Minnie Thompson daughter. That's what the lady said, "I'm going to tell your mother," because they'd know my mom was probably going to tear my butt up.

TS: So you go to Newark, New Jersey because you had relatives.

DB: Yes.

TSD: How did you find things in New Jersey?

DB: Wonderful, just wonderful. As soon as I got there and got a job, my first job was working in a dry cleaning store where I was a clerk there. I couldn't believe here I am a clerk in Newark, New Jersey.

TS: How old were you then?

DB: I was seventeen.

TS: And you'd already graduated from high school?

DB: Yes.

TS: So that was your first job.

DB: First job, a clerk. I forget the name of the dry cleaners. I worked with an older Jewish woman, and every day she brought a pumpernickel cream cheese and bell pepper sandwich, and I learned to love them. Yes, we stayed there for about a year. I went to school in New York—a fashion school. I was tall and skinny and thinking that you could help.

TGS: Oh, you were going to be a model.

DB: Yes. Even there, there were schools that you couldn't go to.

TS: In New York?

DB: In New York. So I went to Ophelia Devore School of charm.

TS: How long were you there?

DB: Probably about a year. I got married at eighteen. Jesse and I had known each other prior to me leaving Weirton, my husband.

TS: Oh so he's from Weirton?

DB: No, he's from Canton, Ohio.

TS: How did you all meet?

DB: I went to Canton, Ohio, to visit my aunt in the summer, and Jess was there.

TS: Okay. You got married at age eighteen, and was he eighteen also?

DB: No, he was seventeen. I robbed the cradle.

TS: You did! Had he graduated from high school?

DB: Yes, he did.

TS: What year did you get married?

DB: Fifty-six is when we got married.

TS: Did he get caught up in Vietnam and all that?

DB: No, but he went to Saudi Arabia. For me, as a young bride, I went to the Azores. When he got that assignment, I had never heard of the Azores in my life. I had to get a map to find out where it was. We were there for two years. I went to Turkey and was there for two years. Prior to coming here we had lived in Seattle for three years.

TS: Did all that travel change your perspective on the world or maybe the place of African Americans in the world in any way? How were you treated, for instance? Were you treated as an American or as a black American when you went to the Azores and to Turkey and places like that?

DB: The Air Force gave us a sense that we would never have had otherwise because one of the things about the service was even when we were stationed in Panama City, Florida, we lived on that base as a community. There was no black, white . . . the service was one of the best things that ever happened to Jess and me. Our kids can fit in almost any circumstances because regardless of whatever was going on in the world, if you were in the service, you were in the service, black, brown, blue, whatever. In Turkey we all lived

together. Just a quick story, in Panama City I was a young Air Force wife, and they had a contest on the base where it was just getting votes, and votes meant like raising money like say, I don't know, nickel, dime whatever. Anyway, I won the contest. These were all airmen wives, young women, and I won the contest. One of the prizes was a gift from a jewelry store in Panama City. When I took the prize to the jeweler he wouldn't give it to me. Panama City, Florida. If my kids had been living in the city of Panama City, they would have had to go to segregated schools also.

TS: They would have been required?

DB: They would have been.

TS: But they were on the base so the Air Force operated the school?

DB: Yes, we have schools on the bases.

TS: So they always went to integrated schools.

DB: Yes, my kids always went to integrated schools.

TS: Did you ever get your prize?

DB: No, I didn't. You're talking about now I've left Wierton, West Virginia, I've been educated in New York, and I've traveled the country with my husband, but there's still this bigger world that wanted to keep me in my place. Also in Panama City you had to ride on the back of the bus. That's why I never would go into that city because we actually had to ride in the back of the bus in Panama City, Florida.

TS: Were you getting active in civil rights that early?

DB: Well, the base allowed me to be, just like entering that contest—I was the only black female that entered it, but I wanted to do it, so I did it. As I said earlier, the military gave us some freedom that we never would have had if we were living within the communities where we were. Jesse was stationed in Florida twice, once in Tampa and once in Panama City.

TS: IN 1971 you come to Cobb County to Dobbins Air Force Base.

DB: Lord, have mercy.

TS: What was his rank, by the way, when you came?

DB: He was a master sergeant.

TS: So he comes as a master sergeant to Cobb County to work at Dobbins, and tell the story about finding a place to live in Cobb County.

DB: Oh, yes. My kids were seven and nine when we came to Cobb County in '71. We had heard about Atlanta, but still hadn't been here before. We were riding up and down Cobb Parkway looking for a place to stay for about two or three weeks. When we first got here, there were lodges up here for the military on Lake Allatoona. We were staying in that, but you could only stay for awhile. But anyway while we were looking for a place to stay here in big time Marietta, Cobb County, Georgia, we found an apartment in Smyrna, beautiful apartment, and you know how people say "vacancy" outside. So we went to the resident manager and said, "We would like to rent the apartment that you've got up there that's vacant." So when we came back, it was gone; it was no longer vacant. My husband went to the base commander out at Dobbins and said, "Hey, I'm in the service. I didn't ask to come here. Y'all sent me here. Now you're going to have to find me a place to stay because I've got two kids riding in the back of a car, and we're up and down." Apparently the base commander called somebody, and they gave us the apartment. So when we went to the apartment, now they told us before we could go into the apartment we had to meet with the resident manager, the owner of the complex, Andover apartments over in Smyrna, if you all are ever in that area. Those were the apartments at the time; they may not even be Andover now. So we went into this room, and this guy was sitting in there, and he said, "We've got to let y'all have this apartment but I want to know who sent you over here anyway. Was it the NAACP?" Which is just full circle for us, you know, but one of the things about that is they gave us the apartment; we stayed there for nine months.

When it came to renew in September, they were not going to renew, so this was another battle. "Why aren't you going to renew?" My two kids, if they went over to the swimming pool, they would close it. We're talking about '71 Cobb County. They would close the swimming pool. They would not let our kids swim in the swimming pool over there. So when we went to renew they were not going to renew. Our neighbors were wonderful in the apartment complex, but when we got there this guy said, "You're going to make us lose business. If we rent to you all of our other tenants are going to move." Nobody moved. The lady next door was just wonderful to us. We became great friends and are friends to this day. So after we've been there and they don't want to renew, we had to come into Marietta. We were going to get us an attorney because we were not going to leave. So the attorney that we get at this particular time was Judge Benham.

TS: Today, Georgia Supreme Court Justice Robert Benham.

DB: Today Justice Benham, but lawyer Benham at the time. Okay, they renewed our lease, and we got to stay in the apartment. By January of that year we found our current house, and we're saying, the heck with this. We gave them time, okay, we're going to leave. They came over and told us—they found out we didn't have tails—"Oh, you all are so nice; if you can find anybody to recommend, tell them they are welcome to come over to Andover apartments." It just goes to show you that people, once they get to know you or maybe give you the chance—I mean, Jessie is making something like \$200 or \$300 a month, and we're trying to survive and have two kids, but the same people who didn't want us to go into the apartment complex eventually though we were some of the best

tenants that they had ever had. That I think allowed other African Americans to go to Andover. We know we didn't recommend anybody.

TS: I was thinking it should have been an easy case for Mr. Benham because there's a Civil Rights Act of 1968 that prohibited exactly what they were doing. When you came to Cobb County the African American population was 4.5 percent. Maybe after you'd been in West Virginia it wasn't that shocking, but what was it like to come to a place where the African American population was so small?

DB: Well, when we moved to where we current live, first thing we wanted to know was what kind of school because when we were living in Smyrna, my daughter was the only African American in her class.

TS: Is that Jeriene [Grimes]?

DB: Jeriene was the only one in her class, but she had a beautiful teacher. She just sort of protected her in a sense, but she allowed those kids who had never interacted with an African American child to learn from that experience more so than making it a negative. My kids graduated from Sprayberry High School, but when we moved where we were and were trying to find a school, at the time when my kids were at Sprayberry High School there were only nineteen blacks in the whole school of Sprayberry. One of the things about Sprayberry is that you have homecoming queens, and the African American kids knew that they would never have an opportunity to be on the homecoming court or to be one of the homecoming court queens, so we advocated for them to let the nineteen African American kids to pick their own, and they did. That was the only way.

TS: So they picked one representative to the court?

DB: Yes.

TS: Was Jeriene the one?

DB: No, Cheryl Allen was. She's currently an airline stewardess and was a beautiful young girl.

TS: Okay. So when you first came here you said your kids were seven and nine, so that's like second grade and fourth grade. What schools did they go to?

DB: They went to a school in Smyrna off of Atlanta Road. Jesse went to Wills and then when they came over to J. J. Daniell's and those are the schools.

TS: When did you join the NAACP?

DB: I joined the NAACP in the early 1970s right after we got here because one of the people that we had to go to with the issue in Smyrna was Dr. [Robert] Johnson who was the

pastor of Zion Baptist Church in Marietta. He was also involved with the NAACP. They were helping us, so I joined. I think the membership was something like \$3.00.

TS: I interviewed him long ago. He wasn't ever the president was he, or was he?

DB: No, he was never the president.

TS: But he was very actively involved.

DB: Active, yes. And that's where a lot of the earlier meetings were held at Zion.

TS: Why don't you talk about the local branch? I guess it was still called the Marietta branch when you joined.

DB: Yes.

TS: Talk about the branch at that time. You said you met at Zion. Of course, they didn't have all the new buildings. I guess they were just building what's the chapel nowadays around 1978. So talk about where you met exactly and who was involved back then.

DB: Well, you had mostly the churches that we met at at that particular time. Zion Baptist Church was a major place. Mack Eppinger's funeral home was one of the places that we would meet. Elsie Densmore was the one that secured our membership. She told us that you could not openly solicit people to be members of the NAACP. Say if you were a teacher you certainly could not be a member of the NAACP. I guess I would say any professionals. Even if you worked with the county, even if you were a janitor, you couldn't be a member of the NAACP.

TS: Ms. Densmore, is she still alive?

DB: No, she's passed.

TS: Does she have any descendants in this area that we might be able to interview?

DB: Yes. Do you know who her family is? She's part of the Ellis family. The young man that went to the . . .

TS: Oh, the basketball player.

DB: Basketball player.

TS: He played at University of Tennessee after Marietta High School. Dale Ellis.

DB: His mother and Ms. Densmore were related.

- TS: Could you talk about her a little bit? I see her name mentioned all the time, and I know she was involved from the very beginning in the Cobb branch, but I don't know much about her.
- DB: She was the secretary, and she also was a recruiter for membership. She would come to your house and would preferably do it at night because she was still afraid to do it openly. She would be a pioneer in the fact that there could have been consequences for her actively recruiting people to be in the NAACP.
- TS: Who were some of the others who were real active when you first joined?
- DB: Well, Dr. Johnson was very active. He wasn't afraid to speak out and be very vocal about who we were. Back when we first came here, we were just dues-paying members. We just paid the membership because they had helped us to secure our apartment. So we weren't really that involved. We became involved with Hugh Grogan as the president of the Marietta NAACP because Hugh was then what we would call a real fighter. He challenged the city of Marietta to say that there has never been any African American representation in the city of Marietta. He fought a three and a half year battle and won it to actually have reapportionment. So we were able to secure a seat on the Marietta City Council. We were involved when those things were happening. Harold Adams and Walter Moon were involved. Harold Adams is now a minister.
- TS: He's a minister okay, so he's still around. Do you know where he is?
- DB: So is Walter Moon. Harold is with the church over there that was in Louisville—Wright Street Baptist.
- TS: Oh, Wright Street Baptist. So he's definitely one we want to talk to. And Walter Moon, I know he's out in Mableton at a church out there. I knew Hugh Grogan; I guess I first met him in '73 when he was running the first time for city council. I voted for him. I saw him just outside the polling place just as I was leaving, but I didn't think he knew who I was, so I was going to walk on by, and he went over and grabbed me and talked to me.
- DB: He was brilliant. He just passed recently and truly was a great friend of ours. It is a great loss. I miss him because he really had some challenges later in life but never diminished his mind. He was just absolutely brilliant.
- TS: So he got you all involved more actively in the 1970s then, and of course he got elected to the city council in '77; were you involved with that campaign?
- DB: Yes, yes, I was. I was also involved in his '81 campaign, which he lost. He and I both will go to our grave believing he won that race.
- TS: Really? Why is that?

DB: We challenged the election because they used the voting machines where you could very easily manipulate those. There were supposed to be some challenge ballots that did not go through. He only lost the race by seven votes.

TS: That was real, real close. That was to John Hammond.

DB: John Hammond. We challenged him and we went up and they showed us how those votes were and everything.

TS: Well, I can't remember what it was now, but there was some kind of hint of controversy of financial impropriety wasn't there in that race against Hugh?

DB: Oh, they were saying that Hugh didn't have a job.

TS: Was that it?

DB: Yes.

TS: Well, I never could understand the financial impropriety because he didn't have a dime. He never did that I could tell.

DB: There are ways to deter you and powers that he can do it very easily.

TS: So you thought it was a dirty campaign?

DB: Oh, definitely. I'm just saying, the election board, I also know, we personally would lose that. I don't think that was the whole general consensus from anybody else. I was just personally involved, and I went in with three other people, for them to show us how he had lost.

TS: How big was the branch at that time in terms of people that were really actively involved? Were there just a handful of you or were there hundreds of you?

DB: I think that during that time there were quite a few. That's interesting that there were quite a few because as the NAACP has grown here in Cobb County, currently we probably have more numbers on the book but not people as committed as they were with Hugh and that struggle—when we knew then that we had not arrived. I think that maybe the current people think that we have.

TS: Of course, it was named the Marietta branch at first. Were practically all the people involved from Marietta or were there people from Acworth and other parts of the county?

DB: Yes, it was people from all over the county, and that's what came to fruition in 1980 when Mary [Cater] came along and said that, "I live in Mableton, I'm an activist and we need for this not to be the Marietta NAACP; it needs to be the Cobb County." So in 1980 under Dover Farrell . . .

TS: So you think Mary Cater played the leadership role?

DB: And Dover Farrell.

TS: And of course, they're both still around. So because the organization was really countywide is that why the change takes place in 1980 as a reflection of more than Marietta?

DB: Yes.

TS: And Dover Farrell was president at that time. Could you talk about him a little bit because I don't really know him? Could you tell me a little bit about what he was like and what he did?

DB: Well, he comes from Alabama. They had run him out of Alabama. When I say run him out, this is the story that he tells. This is probably not going into Alabama history, but the NAACP was sued in Alabama and all their resources were taken away from them. Dover was active there, so the national office asked him to come to Georgia. He was actually asked to come to Georgia to carry on some of the things that he had been doing in Alabama.

TS: Why did he come to Marietta?

DB: He had relatives in Marietta, not Atlanta, although he was working with the Atlanta people.

TS: What were some of the things he did for the Cobb County branch?

DB: Dover was very soft-spoken, but very effective because he knew that as we began to grow that some of the things that we needed to do were probably get involved with the political process. See, that is also in conjunction with Hugh because Dover is part of that suit [*Grogan v. Hunter* over gerrymandered wards in Marietta].

TS: That's right.

DB: That started that suit with him.

TS: So to get more active politically like to endorse candidates for the county commission or to hold candidate forums? What do you have in mind in particular that you all did?

DB: Well, the NAACP is non-partisan.

TS: Oh, so you can't endorse candidates.

DB: We can't endorse. You can recruit. One of the major tasks we do is voter registration that we do year round at every event that we have. We know that the significant number of the increase in voter registration in Cobb County has been a direct effect of our voter registrations.

TS: And the number of African American voters in Cobb County has been increasing tremendously in recent years.

DB: Yes it has.

TS: Okay, so he finishes his term in office, and, let's see, was it Oscar Freeman who was the next president after that?

DB: Yes, sir.

TS: Unfortunately Oscar Freeman died earlier this year.

DB: Yes. We actually had two former presidents of the Cobb NAACP that died this year. Oscar died earlier this year, and Hugh died probably about six or seven weeks ago.

TS: I knew Oscar pretty well but why don't you tell us a little bit about what he did particularly for the Cobb NAACP.

DB: Oscar probably brought us to the forefront of being very visible in Cobb County because he articulated well, he was very visible, and he started something that had never been done. He went after the economic piece of empowering African-Americans in Cobb County. He had the first Fair Share Agreement with the banks. You can go to a bank and borrow money for a car, but even back in the day when I was talking about my father it was hard to get loans for homes or businesses for us even in Cobb County. Oscar was the lead person with the NAACP as his backdrop to begin to start some economic dialogue with Cobb County.

TGS: So the Fair Share was what you called the program?

DB: Fair Share Agreement, yes.

TS: You went to the banks primarily and asked them to . . . ?

DB: Yes, we started with the banks to have a more open door policy with dealing with the African American community. It was an agreement written up and signed off on.

TS: Would you say that was his main accomplishment?

DB: That would be definitely his main accomplishment. One of the things for me with Oscar is under Oscar I was given a base for who I am today too. I was Oscar Freeman's Freedom Fund chairperson. The Freedom Fund person was a person that raises the

money for the branch, so that gave me an opportunity to interface with people that I didn't know prior to it. When I could go in and say, "I'm Deane Bonner, Freedom Fund chairperson," that opened a door for me for the intro. From that background I began to know a whole lot of people. We'll be celebrating next month, October 23, our 27<sup>th</sup> year of Freedom Fund Banquets.

TS: Wow, 27 years. So you were the chair of the Freedom Fund when you had the first banquet?

DB: Yes, sir.

TS: So you started that?

DB: Yes. He was the president, and he appointed me, and, yes, I was the first chair.

TS: But you thought up the idea of the banquet.

DB: Yes.

TS: And what do you do with the money that you raise?

DB: That became the major fundraiser for the NAACP. They give us the funds to do everything else that we do—our youth activities, our scholarships, and just—we're trained three times a year, we're trained locally, we go to the state and then we go to the national. In order for those trainings we would have to have those funds.

TS: I see. Do you get any money from the state or the national?

DB: No. The Cobb County branch NAACP encompasses the six cities of Cobb County. If we have any issue in Cobb County you would bring that issue to the Cobb County branch. Anything in Fulton goes to Atlanta. You have Gwinnett; you have Clayton; so we all have jurisdictions. If someone came to us today about something that's happening in Atlanta, we would have to refer them to the people in Atlanta. As I said, that's how I got to know everybody because by being all over the county you would go to Smyrna and interact with them, and go to—even with the MLK we became friendly with all of the cities. I mean, we could call all of the cities in Cobb County now.

TS: Now.

DB: Now, yes.

TS: After Oscar Freeman, Jerry Dodd was president I guess from 1986 to 1992.

DB: Yes. Oscar served four years, Jerry was six, Sandra McGary-Ervin was two years [1992-94], and Donnie Perry was three years [1994-97]. An interesting scenario, I'm going to just go right into that on getting into my term. I actually did not run for the presidency of

the NAACP. Donnie Perry, the current president ran, and he had two opponents, Randy Scott was one and so was Dwight Graves, so there were three people running for the presidency of the NAACP. I ran for first vice president of the NAACP. During the election for president, Reverend Dwight Graves won the first election, and it was challenged. Randy Scott was not pleased with some of the votes.

TS: So Donnie Perry came in third.

DB: Donnie Perry came in third, the incumbent came in third.

TS: So Randolph Scott challenged it.

DB: Yes, sir. So now it's Randy and Dwight Graves; Donnie is out. But Donnie has to go back in because at this particular point in time now we have got the ire of the national office because, "What are you all doing down there; you can't even conduct an election." So the second election Reverend Graves wins this election also, Reverend Graves does not like how this election went even though he won it, so he sues.

TS: Why does he sue if he won?

DB: Because they were not going to let the numbers that he thought he won by be the official numbers. Really bizarre that you would challenge that.

TS: Does it matter as long as you had the majority?

DB: It didn't matter.

TS: But it did to him.

DB: It did to him.

TS: So he's going to sue, and then what happens?

DB: He's going to sue, so they remove him.

TS: The national?

DB: The national took it away from him, and in the NAACP you move up.

TS: Oh, so that's how you got to be president.

DB: That's how I got to be president because I was the first vice president, and I moved up.

TS: Did he counter sue over that?

DB: No, he was out then.

TS: He's involved with SCLC now isn't he?

DB: Yes, sir.

TS: So he's not involved with NAACP any more?

DB: No, sir.

TS: Okay, so you got to be president by default in '97.

DB: In '97, which is a two-year term. I had the one year as the moved up president. Since then I have run on my own, and I feel good about the fact that I actually could run and win an election the following year.

TS: Right. Well, you've won a number of times.

DB: Oh yes, I've won since then.

TS: Why don't you talk about it because it's been twelve years now, and that's a significant term as president. What are some of the things that you've done during your term that you're proud of?

DB: I'm glad that I shared the story that I won by default because I've come to the conclusion that it was divine intervention—it was meant to be for me to be president. That wasn't something that I sought, but after I got it, I took it very seriously—coming in very afraid of that leadership role and the weight of a national organization. But I understand the mission and goals of the NAACP, and I wanted to show, when you think about the NAACP, people don't realize that the NAACP, although it's a national association for the advancement of colored people, was never started with just black people. White people were actually the founding members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. There were people that decided back in the day that it was wrong to have lynching. Although started in New York City, that is the basis and foundation of this organization. One of the things that I have done in the last twelve years while I have been the president is I learned how to listen and build consensus because when you say the NAACP, people just assume you're coming in, marching, you know, something very negative. So you've got a negative front before you even start talking. But we have now a relationship with all of the six cities in Cobb County. The small victories that we have are very significant to us.

We know all is not well; we don't ever even pretend that. But when I, as the leader of the NAACP of this particular point in time, can get on the phone and call the DA and say, "Hey, you need to give that seventeen year old a break. You need to go past the fact that you see as a young black thug that you don't know; that his mom could be on drugs; this boy could have slept on the floor ...." So we have an ear to say, "Look past the [surface appearance], and give some of these kids a break." I had some personal issues with my

grandkids that have made bad choices, and they have had consequences that were not what they were taught to have. So my advocacy becomes a sincere thing. What has made even the small victories something that we celebrate is because we have been able to cut through the chase. You can just get on the phone. Just like the president of this campus here, we can call Dr. [Daniel S.] Papp. We can call [Cobb Commission Chairman] Sam Olens. I can't say I can call Governor [Sonny] Perdue because I haven't gotten that far yet.

TS: You can call anybody in Cobb County.

DB: I can call mostly anybody in Cobb County. Just a real quick story about Acworth: We have an annual Martin Luther King celebration that we've been having here in Cobb County, and about three years ago Acworth was one of the cities that did not celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday all day. So we go to [Mayor] Tommy Allegood and say, "Tommy, we're coming to your city council meeting; we're going to say to the city council, what is it, what's up with you all? Martin Luther King is a native Georgian, blah, blah, blah, Nobel Peace Prize and all this. Why is it that Acworth cannot celebrate his birthday?" Tommy Allegood—I never had met him. He says, "Okay, Deane, don't come up to our city council meeting. Give us a chance to talk to them." "Okay, we're not going to come." He calls up later and says he went before the city council and got a total unanimous vote to celebrate MLK. So that's what we call small victories. That's a fight that we didn't have to be in the negative. We let him handle it, and Tommy just gave a nice celebration for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary [of the NAACP] in Acworth. You call up to the jail where you've got a seventeen year old to ask that they put him in a safe place. We are true to our mission. We're not a church, we're not a fraternity, we're not a social club, it is a civil rights organization and that's what we try to stay true to that.

TS: Would it be fair to say that a lot of what you do is to deal with people who walk in the door of your headquarters and say, "I've been treated such and such," and you all intervene?

DB: Yes, yes. We have an office in Marietta on Roswell Street. We've had that office now since Oscar Freeman was the president, so it's been over twenty years, but when people call the Cobb NAACP, to give you a prime example, they don't call us telling us about good stuff; they call us and tell us that their kids have been put out of school. And I will just tell you honestly, we go to schools in Cobb County, and I go to the jail. I go to the schools when we get these complaints. You will come into our office if you had a complaint against your job, and that's what we're getting a lot of now, which we didn't have a lot of before, but a lot of our professionals are calling us about jobs where they've been on this job for twenty years and all of a sudden now they're writing me up for this or they're bringing me up for that. But the school system, when school opens in August, 70 to 80 percent of the calls we get is about the school system. We are a strong proponent of public schools, and the drop out rate among our African American males is [very high]. After you get to the seventh, eighth and ninth grade I think there's a lack of motivating them because if you coming in with your pants down and people just see you as a negative, although you could have something up here, but if you would pull your

pants up. We have a whole generation of kids that have lost interest in being in the school system, and we don't know why. Our advocacy has been to get some parental involvement, some parental empowerment groups, and that's been a hard thing because we do have a lot of kids in our community. You have mothers who had them at thirteen, fourteen years old, and so they haven't been able to raise them like they probably could have been raised. But just to give you an example, if you're in our office today, the phone is going to ring; somebody is going to say, well, "My son has been out at county farm for eighteen months." That's probably incomprehensible to anybody because you're supposed to have speedy trials and all of this. Public defenders do not go to see them. We have kids that fight in school, and instead of putting them in out of school suspension you call the police. You have a fourteen year old who has never been in handcuffs. That's traumatic. So our advocacy with the school system is an ongoing thing of how we can bridge that gap to make it a win-win for some of these kids that probably will never lead productive lives unless someone does intervene.

TS: I know you're on the advisory board for Dan Papp for Kennesaw State. Have you been involved with the African American male initiative at KSU?

DB: Yes. My son [Jesse, Jr.] is a coach and a teacher at Kennesaw Mountain High School, and they started one at the high school. We were involved. Our role in that is almost something like what we're doing here today. We came in as mentors and advisors, and I did attend the event that you all had here at KSU yesterday because there is a buy-in to us wanting to see that program succeed.

TS: Well, there are a lot of detail questions I could ask, but let me ask one kind of wrap up, general question, and that's, you've been in Cobb County now for thirty-eight years, how would you assess the changes in Cobb County over the last thirty-eight years from the Cobb NAACP perspective perhaps or your perspective?

DB: My perspective is that we have gone from that 4.5 percent African American from my beginning here to now almost 23 percent of African Americans in Cobb County. One of our major roles is that we become the watchdogs to make sure that is represented in everything that's happening. Even to a prime example to us is Southern Polytechnic State University. Southern Poly sent us something here recently that they had their graduating class. We have about eighteen students from Southern Poly that want to start a branch [of the NAACP] over at Southern Poly, and you see there's no one that looks like these students on this advertisement. So we said to her [President Lisa A. Rossbacher] that those are the kind of things that we know are not intentional, but please let's make this a little bit more welcoming if you see someone that looks like you—just a small thing like your publications looking diverse. And of course, we certainly say that to Dr. Papp. I was on the board with Dr. Siegel and was reappointed when Dr. Papp came on, so we have a working relationship with KSU. One of the advocacies for us at KSU has been that they needed to diversify their hierarchy, and Dr. Papp did that.

TS: Well, thank you, and let me open it up now to the class. Anybody that wants to ask a question?

CLAUDIA ZIBANAJADRAD: I'm going to go back in time. Dr. Scott had asked previously about how you were treated when you went overseas to Turkey and to the Azores. Could you say a little more about your treatment?

DB: Thank you for asking that because you know what was interesting about Turkey and the Azores? I had a maid. You know what I'm saying? I was able to afford a maid when I was over there. Here I am in a foreign country for the first time in my life, and I had a maid that you paid \$3 a week to come in and clean my house. So we were Americans. I mean, I was a black American, and I had the people of that land that came in and cleaned my house, watched my kids.

CZ: They didn't mind taking your money.

DB: Didn't mind taking my money. Thank you ; I forgot that.

STEPHANIE McKINNELL: I have two questions; the first is, when is the first time you ever heard of the NAACP?

DB: It was when I was in New York. I didn't join, but there was an incident where the NAACP [intervened]. I've always known that the NAACP was a civil rights organization, so that would probably be the early 1950s.

TS: And your second question?

SM: Did you say that it was about in 1980-ish when the focus changed to a political focus for the Cobb County NAACP? Before that does it seem like housing rights or [other issues were more important]?

DB: Yes, yes. It really had been the early 1970s that the shift was political because that's when I was talking about Mr. Grogan that we decided that it was time to have some representation on the political scene.

TS: So you're saying you became political in the sense that there wasn't any way a black person was going to get elected before then, but it became possible, and so now you're trying to get black candidates out there?

DB: Yes.

JOHN McKAY: When candidates are running for office in the NAACP do they have platforms, and if so what have yours been?

DB: Well, one of our officers, Darryl Wilson, just ran for the school board. He's also a vice president [of the Cobb Branch]. As an officer, he had to resign from our board, and then he became an independent candidate. But in this current battle about health care, we [the NAACP] support health care. We at our national convention said that health care is a

civil rights issue for us because in our community we feel there needs to be more studies on disease and things that actually affect us that may not affect other people. So if we had a candidate running now that would be a candidate that would be supporting the current health care issue. Did that answer that for you?

STEPHEN BRIGGS: When does the NAACP draw a line if someone is considered a criminal before they take them under their wing?

TS: The question is how does the NAACP decide who they're going to support in criminal cases?

DB: If you come to our office tomorrow I can show you the letters from inmates that feel like that have been unfairly or unjustly charged with a crime. A prime example I'll tell you; we have three young teenagers that did an armed robbery here recently. Well, the family came to us. The one kid in this car said he didn't know what was happening; he was just in the car; and they went into the store, blah, blah, blah, robbed somebody then came out; and they took off. After they got in the car he knew what happened. So when they go to court they're saying to us that all of them are guilty because he was there, da-da-da-da. We agree that they all are guilty, but we do not agree that this kid should get the ten years as the person that went in there and put the gun to somebody and took off.

TS: So would you help them get a separate attorney?

DB: Oh, yes, oh, yes, we do that. We have pro bono attorneys. If you came into the NAACP, when you call us on the phone and are just ranting and raving about, oh, they did this to me, they did that to me; that is just me and you on that telephone or whomever gets that call. The only way that the NAACP even looks at what you're saying is that you actually have to put it in writing that says I'm alleging this happened to me, and this is who I'm blaming; I'm blaming this cop for stopping me when I wasn't doing anything; and then you have to sign off on it. That gives us the legal right, almost like the release form I signed for Tom, to say that we can talk to the police chief or somebody else on your behalf about what they're alleging. There are two sides. Just because you call the NAACP and say somebody did something to you, we certainly are legitimate enough to not just take your word for it. I don't know if that answers the question. Our position would be let's look at everything because drugs have been so prevalent in our community and with so much of the things that are going on in this county, we are very open to you making bad choices. There are consequences.

TS: Would it be fair to say that you're saying you don't make a choice on who is guilty and who is not; you're concerned about due process and that they are treated fairly?

DB: Yes, more so due process and treated fairly. Because there is no way that you should sit out at county farm for twenty-four months without a trial.

TS: And nobody's at county farm unless they're awaiting trial.

DB: Yes.

TS: If they're convicted they wouldn't be there.

DB: Right. So they are waiting. We have a MOU or memorandum of understanding with the public defenders, the circuit defender's office, because 90 percent of those kids that write us those letters can't afford—their parents can't afford—attorneys; and they're out there; and these public defenders have just a lot of cases; so they're not a priority for them; so they're saying that nobody has come to see me.

JAY LUTZ: I have a question for you about Hugh Grogan. I wonder what you thought is the lasting impression he'll have on the local branch.

DB: On the local branch, in fact, just prior to the elections that are being held here currently, we are advocating for Hugh to have a street named after him or something named after him. That will be our advocacy. But the NAACP, next month, on October 23<sup>rd</sup> when we have our Freedom Fund Awards Banquet, our political award that we give will now be the Hugh Grogan award—actually a name to that award rather than just saying the political action award. That's what the branch will be doing.

TS: Jay is already working on the case of *Grogan v. Hunter* and wants to do some interviews on that case.

DB: They found some phenomenal things when they were clearing out Hugh's stuff, his two sons have; you may want to talk to them.

TS: I've been wondering about that, what are they doing with his papers?

DB: We wanted them and we've asked them to give them to Kennesaw State for the archives.

TS: There doesn't seem to be any more questions, so we'll conclude then. But I really, really thank you for coming today. This has been fantastic.

DB: Well, I'm glad to be here. I hope that you all will be doing great interviews. I know that you will. Thanks for allowing me to share this time with you all. Our office is in Marietta, 605 Roswell Street. If there is any other research that you want to do, come in and see where we actually are and some of the things that we do. You have a personal invitation from me to do that. We're right across from the Wachovia bank, and we are in there most afternoons after 1:30.

## INDEX

- Adams, Harold, 12  
Allegood, Tommy, 19  
Allen, Cheryl, 10
- Benham, Robert [Justice], 9-10
- Bonner, Deane Thompson  
Childhood in Weirton, WV and Education of, 1-4  
As President of the Cobb NAACP, 1  
Views on segregated schools during her youth, 2  
About her father (Lewis Thompson), 2  
On the role economic status in West Virginia, 3  
About her mother (Minnie Thompson), 3-5, 6  
On the problems African Americans faced in securing home mortgages, 4-5  
In Newark, New Jersey, 4, 6  
Attending Ophelia Devore School of Charm in New York City, 6-7  
Marriage to Jessie Bonner Sr., 7  
On life, and raising a family in, the United States Air Force, 7-8  
Living abroad, 7, 21  
Discussing the issues of finding a residence in Cobb County (1971), 8-10  
Joins NAACP, 10-11  
On meeting Hugh Grogan, 12  
Views of Hugh Grogan, 12  
Involvement in Hugh Grogan election campaigns, ('77, '81, '85), 12-13  
Views of 1981 Ward 5 Councilman election, 12-13  
On Oscar Freeman accomplishments, 15  
Role as Freedom Fund chairperson, 15-16  
On the 1997 election for Cobb NAACP president, 16-18  
On becoming, and role as, Cobb NAACP president, 18-22  
Serving on the committee to help diversify the faculty at Kennesaw State, 20
- Bonner, Jesse Sr., 1, 7, 8, 9  
Bonner, Jesse Jr., 1, 9, 10, 20
- Cater, Mary Ward, 13-14
- Cobb NAACP  
During the 1970's, 10-11  
Meetings at Zion Baptist Church, 11  
Meetings at Mack Eppinger's Funeral Home, 11  
Problems of recruitment, 12  
Membership size of, 13  
Geographic distribution of members, 13-14  
Voter registration drive, 15  
Fair Share Agreement, 15

- Fundraising, 16
- Freedom Fund banquet, 16, 23
- Common complaints to, 19
- Location of office, 19
- Role in education, 19
- Role in the criminal justice system, 19, 22
- Role in getting Acworth, Ga to acknowledge MLK holiday, 19
- Role in African American Male Initiative at Kennesaw State University, 20
- Changing the focus of, 21
- Hugh Grogan award, 23

Densmore, Elsie, 11-12

Dobbins Air Force Base, 8

Dodd, Jerry, 16

Ellis, Dale, 11

Ervin, Sandra McGary, 16

Ferrell, Dover, 13-14

Freeman, Oscar, 15, 16, 19

Graves, Dwight, 17

Grimes, Jeriene Bonner, 1, 9, 10

Grogan, Hugh

- Elected first African American Councilman in Marietta, 13
- As president of Marietta NAACP, 13
- Role in reapportioning Marietta voting wards (*Grogan v. Hunter*), 13, 15, 22, 24
- Impressions of, 13
- Death of, 16
- Helping to change the focus of Cobb NAACP, 22
- Cobb NAACP award named after, 24

Growth of African American population in Cobb County, 20

Hammond, John, 13

Integrated schools on US Air Force Bases, 8

Johnson, Robert Dr., 10-11

Marietta NAACP (see Cobb NAACP)

- Reasoning for renaming, 14

Moon, Walter, 12

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

- Regulations of, 12, 15-16
- Distribution of and interaction between branches, 17

Origins of, 19  
Supportive of health care reform, 22-23

Papp, Dan, 19, 20  
Perry, Donnie, 16

Race relations at Sprayberry High School, 10

Scott, Randy [Randolph], 17  
Segregation in Panama City, Florida, 8

Weirton, West Virginia  
Location of, 2, 3  
Segregated society in, 2, 5  
Race relations in, 2-3  
Dunbar High School, 4  
Segregated schools in,  
Curriculum in, 4  
Segregated businesses in, 6  
Marlin Heights section of, 6

Wilson, Daryl, 21

Zion Baptist Church, 11

This item is part of the following collection:  
Thomas Allan Scott, 1943-  
Kennesaw State University Oral history project, 1978-  
KSU/45/05/001

The collection is held by:  
Kennesaw State University  
Dept. of Archives, Special Collections, & Records Management  
1000 Chastain Rd  
Sturgis Library Rooms 215-226  
Kennesaw, Georgia 30144  
(770) 423-6289  
archives@kennesaw.edu

To request permission to publish, reproduce, publicly display, broadcast, or distribute this material in any format, you must contact the Dept. of Archives, Special Collections, and Records Management.