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Brown, Matthew Southhall, Lottie, and Naomi

Naomi Brown

Lottie Williams-Brown

Matther Southhall Brown Sr.

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Carolina Connections

Interviewees: Naomi Brown, Lottie Brown, and Reverend Matthew Southall Brown

Interviewers: Debbie Frost and Malik Austin

July 25th, 2013, Savannah, Georgia.

Debbie Frost (DF): Good afternoon today is July 25th, my name is Debbie Frost and Malik Austin is behind the camera. We are having a video interview with Reverend Matthews

Matthew Southall Brown (MSB): Southall. You forgot to say Southall.

DF: Southall Brown Sr, because there is a junior on the planet. Also with his lovely wife, first lady Lottie Williams, they've been married for 63 years

Lottie Brown (LB): Yes.

MSB: Lottie Williams Brown

DF: Lottie Williams Brown?

LB: Mhmm

DF: And with my good friend Naomi Brown, thank you so much for allowing us to interview you today. First we're gonna, again this is a project we've been working on with Kenyon College, this is part of a program and project called Carolina Connections. And, of course, I want to start with you, Reverend Matthews could you tell us a little bit about where you grew up and just a little bit about your story?

MSB: Ok, let me first of all welcome you into our home. We take pride in this little home that we have here, our 4 children grew up here and they all are doing well, good citizens. I was born here in Savannah Georgia on the East side of the City. I went to school here, in fact, I started in St. Benedict catholic school and then my parents transferred me to public school, and I went to the military, World War II and that's a chapter in my life that I like to remember that like to talk about, coming out of the military I did several things, I went to diesel engineering school, and I knew when I was in Middle School that God had a calling on my life, and I didn't completely dismiss it because it wouldn't go away, but I didn't do anything to kill anybody's joy, I went to the proms and the dances and did everything that junior high and high school kids would do. I, after finishing High school, Beech high, that's when I went into the Military, came out, as I said, did several things and one of the things that I'm proud of that I did is I went to diesel engineering school and I was the First African-American junior engineer, diesel engineer on the Savannah River. But that calling that I said that God had on my life would not go away, and I have pastored 4 churches in my over 50 year career. As a minister, ending up right here in my hometown, Savannah at the St. John Baptist Church, they call the mighty fortress. I stayed there for 35 years and now I'm retired and have been retired for 6 years.

DF: And his lovely wife, First Lady, Lottie.

LB: My name is Lottie Williams Brown, I was born in Beaufort, South Carolina, my parents told me that I was brought to Savannah when I was 4 months old. So I consider myself as a Savannahian, you know, and I went to the schools here, the first school I went to was Westborough School, down on Martin Luther King drive, and then to Beech, Beech High and Junior high. And after I finished with those schools I attended Savannah State College. We have 4 children, two girls and two boys and all of them are college graduates and we're happy about that with a lot of grandchildren, but I worked for the EOA, that's the program, for 27 years and I enjoyed it because of working with children and being with children all the time. I've been with my husband for 63, in the ministry 50 years, not a minister, just a the minister's wife, what would be surprising to you is that this lady here (puts hand on Naomi's shoulder) is my first cousin.

MSB: She didn't know that.

LB: Her father, and my daddy were brothers.

DF: Ok

LB: And we found that out about how long ago?

Naomi Brown (NB): About 30 years.

MSB: They didn't know that until they were both grown

NB: I didn't move here 'til then.

LB: Now, how I met her is she joined our church

NB: Through my Grandma.

LB: So that's how we met each other in Church.

NB: And we still didn't know we was kin (laughs)

LB: And so we are first cousins, our fathers were brothers.

DF: Wow that is so amazing, and now Ms. Brown can you tell us a little bit about you?

NB: My name is Naomi Brown and I think I'm a what you call a mystery, young lady, because I was born in Brooklyn, New York, and I was raised in 2 states in 1 year. I was in South Carolina with my grand aunt in the school year, and then when school was out I was back in New York City and that continued until I graduated, every year I was either North or South. I yearned for my grand aunt and the culture in the south, that's where I got my language from, my Gullah accent. A lot of people thought I was from the Caribbean, are you from St. Troy, as a matter of fact I had a fight with a young man on my job in New York because I worked at 2 different

hospitals, the first hospital I worked at was Goldwater Memorial Hospital on Roosevelt Island, I worked there for about 4 years. Then I went to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan and when I was at Goldwater you had a lot of the Caribbean people that worked there and they said I was denying my country because I was not an American, and I told them yes I was. And they said "Well I want to see your Birth certificate" I told them I was a negro. It took me a lot of me as a young teenager to adapt to the Caribbean people because they felt like I was disowning their native ground, but I wasn't. I was just an innocent child, born up north, raised in South Carolina and New York. So my dialect is because when I went to school, if I was in New York I spoke northerner, but when I come south you gotta speak their language, because if you didn't speak the language of the southerners on St. Helena's they say "you speaking, who you think you is." So you had to speak Gullah, your English was already taken apart, you know like "Comere" instead of "Come here." It was a difference in the conversation and so I had to learn how to accept the northerners because up north if you say Good Morning Sir you didn't get a response, but if you said Good Morning you got a response. So I had to learn to deal with a southern state and a northern state, when I come south and I been in north all the summer and I come back to this southern state and I would say Hi, Good Morning I would get a knock on my head because I had no manners and i'm not speaking, "who you think you is?" and I would tell my grand aunt and she said "When you in Rome you do as the Romans do," and I said what you mean the Romans? And I went to this old lady house, and she cooks, she used to cook the best corn bread, and she knew that I would come for corn bread that day that I came from New York and went to school, I went to her house to get cornbread and I went over and said "Hi Cousin Hansen, how you doing?" And she didn't say nothing to me and the cornbread was coming out of the stove and it look so nice and golden. And she was huge and she had to rock three times to get up and she had a cane that she had to get up on, and she got to the stove and she took this corn bread out, and she had a white wooden stove, with enamel, but everything was pure white, her pots were clean, shining. She took the corn bread and put it on top of that, I'll never forget it, and she covered it with a towel, dish towel. All of the sudden a can fell on the floor, and for what reason I couldn't understand and she said "hand me that can" and I said ma'am, and she said "hand me that can" and I got the can, I couldn't understand why she dropped the can, the can was in her hand, and right when I give her the can she lifted it up to come down on me and I ran, out the door, didn't get my cornbread, told my grand aunt that Ms. Hansen tried to hit me with the can and I don't know why, and she didn't give me my cornbread. She said "What did you say to her," I just asked her how she was doing and said Hi Ms. Hansen. She said "Where's the Ma'am?" I said huh? Andrew said I don't have to say ma'am, "Ok, but Andrew live in New York." That was her twin brother. She said "Now, you're not in New York, you're in South Carolina, now you go back and apologize for what you said." And so the next day I went back and apologized and she said "Oh, I thought you left your manners in New York." And I had to learn when I came south to say yes ma'am, no ma'am, and I had to learn when I went to New York to say Hi and bye so growing up I was taught how not to be racial against white people by my grand aunt she said "We all of the same, jesus created all of us. We just of different shades, but we all are god's people.." It was a tough situation because when I was growing up I got the tail end of the colored bathroom and the colored water fountain and walking on the side that was hot, while the white people walk on the side that was sunny, I mean that was cool, shady. I got caught in the transition of what was happening in real life, I was there, I witnessed the outdoor toilet, no running water in the house, a bucket to use at night when you have to go to the

bathroom, the washboard to wash the clothes, kneeling on the knees, because of my great aunt who taught me how to survive in life and to look at people equally. She said "There is no big me or little me, we are all equal colors, whether your pink, blue, purple," I said mama I ain't ever seen a pink person or a blue person. She was trying to, she taught me well and give me understanding. I took her teaching with me as I became an adult and faced the real world and all of her teachings have come to me now. She told me "you're going to get to a point in your life where you're going to be at two roads, You have to make a decision as to where you going, and I said am' if there's two roads I'm gonna go on that road (points right) whatever, she said "in time you will understand." Well, I reached that time, she said "if somebody give you stone, give 'em bread." I said ma' if somebody give me stone I'll give them a brick. But I understand why she was saying that because I have reached that situation. I have reached the way of learning to be still and to listen, reached the way to find people with wisdom. When I get angry with Pastor Brown here in my life long time ago before I knew that he was even married to Lottie, my cousin, because I had a son that was like 10 childs in 1 and when I went to the school system here in Savannah I had to call Pastor Brown, I had to call 2 pastors. I called Pastor Brown, and my former, god bless the dead, Reverend Stokes, to go with me to get my son out of jail, or to go to the school because I didn't need them to speak for me, but by their presence being there my tongue was under control, cause you can't say some of those things in front of a pastor. You need to give them honor and respect, so I needed them to ride on my tongue while I said what I needed to say, but without those two men in my life my child, my one child that give me a lot of problems, wouldn't be where he's at today. Because he (pointing at Southall Brown) took the time not knowing that God had already placed me in his life for a reason, but I didn't know that reason 'til later when I found out later on. That that was the person I was supposed to be with, god gave me Cousin Lottie and Pastor Brown. I don't tell anybody that, any of my other relatives, because I like to hear what they got to say (laughs, along with others) you know, if you tell somebody if you in need then you will get the whole, the juicy part, so very few people know that I'm related because I want it to be that way because I want to hear. If you say something and people don't understand, I say when you finish, now give me my pastor, yes sir.

DF: Well it sounds to me like you guys are family and I'm understanding that role, that strong bond between family. When you speak about your children, and how proud you are of your children and the fact that they're educated. And I find that people on the island are very strong on education and sending their children to school to be educated. What kind of messages came from your parents, how did they instill that value in you growing up? We'll start with the pastor.

MSB: Well, my father was a hard working man I guess, when I really came to the realization of life, he was a postal worker, and back then if you were an African American and you worked for the postal service, or you wrote insurance, or if you were a mortician, etc, then you were considered as a middle class African American, I didn't realize that we were poor until I got grown, my father was a good provider. He provided for our needs, but he was not one of these kinds of fathers who would give allowances every week, or money, you know, he was not like that. But he provided the needs, he provided a good home, I've never lived in a rented house in my life, because he always was thrifty, and when we lived on the east side, we lived in the house we lived in and then there was a house next door that he rented. I came up realizing and thinking you know, that we were well-to-do, but then when I got out into life and saw how other people

lived we were poor. So I really didn't know we were poor. But my mother, my daddy was somewhat passive, but my mother was go-getter, she was thrifty. she, it didn't dawn upon me 'til after I got up there, when I would hear my mother and father talking, they were talking about bills, and she would say, give it to me, I'll take it to him, what she meant was the person they owed or whatever was refusing to take the money, they were garnishing my daddy's salary so my mother was always that kind of person. She was always the person, as a remember, with a petition in her hand, going through the neighborhood, getting it signed. These palms trees on Victory Drive are still here, and I want to believe because of my momma, they threatened to move them several times and make this a part of the federal highway. She was always the class mother at the school, PTA, that's the kind of mother I had. She lived to be a good ripe age, she lived to be somewhere around 86, 87. Fairly decent health until she died, very thrifty, very thrifty. My mother would take the spring flowers off the spring hat and make it a winter hat, when summer came she take the flowers off and put the flowers back on. That's the kind of, you don't know what I'm talking about, I use that. I used to see my mother back then, they wash rice like that. (rub hands together) I don't know why, I guess to wash starch off I guess. She would be standing over the sink washing rice and if two or three grains slipped out of her hands you would think she was going down the drain to get it, you know, she was just that kind of woman. I think that that went a long way in assisting my father to be the kind of provider that he was, because they didn't throw away nothing, and I learned from them to be an improviser, yeah. I made my own kites, I made my own skating mobiles, you know, I did that. My parents were good parents, they had good virtues, and they were good godly people.

DF: And your parents growing up (to Lottie), anything that you want to share about your parents?

LB: Ok, my dad worked for the city, and he also was an insurance collector, and my dad and mom were very religious people, black people, and my mother was just a housewife, she was always there for us when we got home, all the food was ready and everything, but she didn't do anything but take care of us and my dad provided for 6 children, three girls, and three boys, and we lived in one of the projects in Savannah. I don't know if y'all ever heard of it, Yamacraw village, you might hear about it when you visit here, but it was one of the first projects in Savannah. It was a nice place, but we lived in the projects we lived 522, that was our house number and we lived right behind Bryant Baptist Church and we always would go, when we had a meeting, we would go to the back and look in there and see them having church. And that was right by school, like I said school was on Westborough street, Westborough street school and then I went to Beech collar, finish high school and went out to Savannah for college.

MSB: I might add to that, she mentioned projects, but Savannah has the distinction of one of the first towns or cities for public housing. Yamacraw village, what she's talking about, is named for the Yamacraw Indians, and those are the Indians that James Oglethorpe met when he landed here in 1733 and just happened so that the Yamacraw Indians were friendly people, and you can take that from there. I just wanted to short of peg it back on there.

DF: Thank you, thank you. Now you said that were raised by your great aunt?

NB: My grand aunt, my mother and father both left. My mother left Savannah when she was 15, she left from Eastborough street to go to Colo, at that times was Colos School and my father was from Yancy, and they both moved to New York when they was in their teens, that's their home as a matter of fact they was married in New York, they never came back South but I was a transitional person that moved around and decided I wanted to come back home, so I came and left New York City in 1976, in July.

DF: Ok, and when you came back you came to St. Helena?

NB: St. Helena Island.

DF: St. Helena Island, and what did you do on St. Helena?

NB: On St. Helena I moved into to my mother's father's house and I was working on Hilton Head as a nurses, a technician, and went to church over there at Ebenezer Baptist Church, I got baptized at an early age in Ebenezer Baptist Church.

DF: That's your family's church?

NB: That's my family's church, that's my mother's church. But, when my grand aunt herre in Savannah took sick, who had no children, I gave up St. Helena to take care of her because everyone was so busy and everybody recommended that I be with her. And that's how I wind up in Savannah, and I was living in St. Helena when I moved from New York.

DF: And you were living in your grandfather's house? What was your grandfather;s name?

NB: His name was William Bowles Chaplin

DF: Oh, ok, so is that land still in your family?

NB: That house is still there, and a pair of trees.

DF: Pear trees?

NB: A pair of trees is in the yard.

DF: Now then, I've lost my train of thought when you said those pair of trees. Are any of your family member's still staying on the land?

NB: Nobody is there now I am the caretaker of the property, the person who was the caretaker before died in february, she was living in Philly, so I've really always been the caretaker of the property.

DF: Is there any plans you have for that land?

NB: Right now my aunt that's living, she is really in charge, but I still oversee, but I'm closer, she lives in New York City so I'm the one that goes over and make sure the yard is cut and make sure that nobody's breaking into the property.

DF: Do you have any idea how long that land has been in your family?

NB: Well grandpa, Kit Chaplain, he was the first Deacon back in 1865 when Ebenezer was organized, so you can take it from there.

DP: Any idea how much he payed for that land back at that time?

NB: I haven't the slightest idea but he had owned a lot of land back on St. Helena during that time, as a matter of fact, he came to St. Helena from Africa, and his Katherine, from England, and came through Philadelphia to St. Helena. I did a what you call, a history, I tried to do a history on my great-grandparents to bring it up to where it is today, for the kids, and I did research in 2007, I started on my mother's side of the family, and that's how I find out about everybody, my mother didn't know much so I had to talk to my uncles and all them. So we had one uncle that left St. Helena at an early age, Peter, and he went to Alabama, but because Alabama back in the day was such a place that you didn't talk about, they didn't talk about him. So there's relatives there, not children, but I'm quite sure there's a lot of relatives there that don't even know where, where Peter came from, because nobody contacted him once he went to Alabama. I asked my mom about him once and said "You know you got an uncle named Peter?" And she said "I've heard his name but nobody ever talk about him," I said he moved to Alabama. But I did a research, because I'm a historian and I like to know my people and who my family is, and I started a book about myself in 2004, about my life history and everything I remember from the time I was 3 years old and I think I stop, I was still in the 6th or 7th grade, and I haven't finished yet, I'll finish it when I retire probably. But I wanted to tell a story about me that children can know that you can make it through all your ups and downs, and all your struggles, because if call on Jesus he is the answer, and the one that can bring you through anything because he does no fear at all, and if you hold on to his unchanging hand things will work out.

MSB: How many acres of land did...

NB: Grandpa Kit have?

MSB: Yeah.

NB: Pastor, I'll have to get back to you, because I know, it was a lot in different areas of St. Helena, a matter of fact because my mother and my uncle and them moved up north and wasn't planning on coming back they sold it, I was the only relative there it was like going to a cemetery to a grave site because they were auctioning off that land, and I'm the only one that knew where all the land was at because of my grand uncle and grand aunt, they used to walk the property with me, I could go right now and show you every piece of property that they had. But it was a lot of acres of land and it was all sold on auction.

MSB: Back then negroes realized that land meant money, my father's sister and her husband owned a place about 7 miles out south of here, and he end up with about 125 acres of land, and it's called Derek's Inn, and he came from Alabama to go to Georgia State College, there was 2 things back then that negroes cherished and that was land and educatio. His palace had a creek that ran through it and his place was the only place where blacks in this area could go for recreation. That's why they called it Derek's Inn, it had pavillion on it and it had a little creek that ran through there where people swam stuff like that. We used to go out there when we were kids, That's why I bring it up because there were a lot of negroes that owned property in South Carolina and in Georgia, it is particularly coastal, because when Sherman came through he gave those slaves quite a bit of coastal South Carolina, part of North Carolina, and Georgia. As far down as St. Solomon's Island.

DF: I like that you mentioned that Sir. And you said that something that was really important you said that poor African Americans at that time, negroes, you said that land and education was very important. It meant ownership, it gave them a sense of pride. And I hear from all three of you have strong ties to religion, and being ground in religion and Pastor I know you have something to say about what was able to sustain you during those hard times and able to even share those values with your children, how important God is in your life. That seems to ring true even on the island, and I know you want to say something about how strong your faith is and making these transitions, and how it affected you and your family, did you want to talk to that at all, Reverend.

MSB: I don't want to give you a sermon and if I give a sermon, I'm going to have to lift an offering (all laugh), I say that jokingly, just let me say that religion has played an important part in my parent's lives, and I know in their parent's lives. My father was member of the First African Baptist Church here in Savannah, which is known as the oldest Black Baptist Church here in North America. First African, my family, our family, my family, represents about a fourth generation in that Church, religion has played a very important role in our lives. Our belief in the lord is very strong. I don't want to sound sacrilegious but I do believe that God will supply all of our needs according to his riches and glory, you know, if you trust in him. But God is not going to come down to planet Earth and spoon feed nobody, he expects us to use the sense he heads has given us. We reared our children with a strong belief in religion. They fortunately, have followed our teachings in that area, and consequently their children, and I don't know what's happening after that, but their children are strong believers as well. I've been telling everyone as hot as it's been around here if I wasn't a believer I'd become one (all laugh).

DF: Good advice, (to Lottie) And religion in your family as well because I think you also said you were raised in a very religious household.

LB: Say that again?

DF: I said, so religion is very strong in your family as well?

LB: Yeah, yeah, mmmm, my father was a highly religious man, because my father was the chairman of the Deacon's for 27 years, that's outrageous, don't you think so, 27 years. Yeah, but that's where we grewed up, in the church. That's the way our children are brought up now. I have

Maxine, that girl went in there, and she's from Tennessee, she's a music teacher, and what college work out there, Maxine in Tennessee?

MSB: Well, she, TSU, Tennessee State University.

LB: Yeah, TSU, and this is Christa, she lives next door, she's an English major, that's my oldest son right there (pointing to pictures) Leonard teaches, science.

MSB: All of them teachers, in fact, we come from a generation of teachers, all of my aunts were teachers and I guess that's why our children followed along in that line.

LB: But this is something here, tell this story to the next generation. (hands book)

MSB: Yeah you gotta read it, If you've not already read it. Leonard wrote that.

LB: And yeah, he has written another

MSB: He's updated this.

LB: Yeah, he has updated this and I think that's important.

DF: We have to pass it on.

MSB: You gotta pass it on.

DF: And that's part of this project as well, passing on the history and the heritage and the culture, we want to maintain that. That's why this project is very important to me.

MSB: And that's why I'm taking the time to do what you all have come here to do, because if you don't know where you have come from you can't go very far. And unfortunately among our people so many of us don't know our roots. It was not until Alex Haley that we became interested in who we are and where we came from

LB: And speaking of where we came from, 2 blocks from here, I told you we came up in the projects, but go in the projects so that you can better your condition, right. So my daddy felt he needed to do better so we moved out of the projects and we have a family home two streets from here right now. On 41st street, you know you have a family home and people come home, they wanna come home. When everyone comes to Savannah now they come here, we live here and you live next door.

DF: A strong sense of family, and I know it's that same with you (to Naomi). I met you at the picnic and I know it was the church family picnic.

NB: Mhmm, friendship family day, the picnic that you came to started three years ago. What had happened was that every father's day the women always treat the men, they cook and serve the

men at the church on Father's day, I mean, yeah, so the men decided years ago they can't let the women outdo them so they decided to have a picnic where they would do the cooking for all of the women and children and family members and whatever. For all the men that's in the church it's their responsibility to make sure they're wives eat that day, but if you're a guest or whatever you can go eat or whatever. But it's to build a relationship between just sitting and dismissing and going home, but to fellowship and get to know each other on common ground. And so this year's the third year that this has been going on, with the Church.

DF: I'd like to take this time to thank your family, thank you, you are family since you're first cousins, family still, for taking the time to share your stories with us. This is going to be truly valuable to our students to understand the value of family, education, and maintain their rich culture and history, so I thank you again for allowing us to come into your house, any parting words?

MSB: Well, it's a breath of fresh air to me, and my question to you all would be, would a copy of this video be made available to us.

DF: Absolutely, I'll make sure that happens. So thank you so much, and we will be talking again real soon.

MSB: I hope so.

LB: Thank you for coming.