

ORAL HISTORY RELEASE FORM

DATE: 4/1/98

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Signature of Interviewee:

Larine Watts

Name:

LARINE WATTS

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Name of Interviewer:

Rebecca Dixon, Stephanie Reitz, Jessica Williams

Special Restrictions:

 ORAL HISTORY DATA SHEET (to be turned in with tapes & transcript)

98-10

INTERVIEWEE: Margaret Brown and Larine Watts

ADDRESS: 811 Hill Street & 800 Hill Street, Farmville VA

DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 1, 1998

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Race Street Baptist Church

INTERVIEWER/S: Jessica Williams, Stephanie Reitz, Rebecca Dixon

TOPICS COVERED: Civil rights movement in Prince Edward County: schools' closing, reactions of interviewees

NUMBER OF TAPES: 1

Interviewer: First question is when and where were you born?

MB: I was born in Cumberland County November 26, 1933

Interviewer: how long have you lived in Prince Edward County?

MB: All my life

IN: What church did you attend at the time of the schools closing?

MB/LW: Grace Baptist church. It was on Main Street

IN: Did you know Barbara Johns' family?

MB: Yeah, but I didn't know him as well

IN: How did you first hear about the student strike?

MB: I knew something was going to happen

IN: Did you know beforehand that it was going to happen?

MB: No, I went to school. I walked out.

MB: We were working at the drug store. I only heard them talk about it

MB: We came here around the time that Supreme Court handed down the ruling. So, we were here during the time that people were getting angrier and angrier and it was very bad.

LW: and those private schools

MB: I know our son, was just a little boy, and him and his dog over there now where they have that field, where the important museum we're hoping to have, you know, the field down below there. Well, that used to be where the kids would go and play ball and stuff. It didn't belong to the college

MB: and him and his dog, oh boy, that was their favorite marking place and we had two little boys that used to come down whenever they could and they played together, you know, and I don't see anything wrong with it. They got along well, you know, and their parents didn't mind. Certainly, we didn't. Young men – because they were out there – and shot at my son with BBs. And he wears the scar right above the eye. They were just kids. They were like 6-7 years old out there playing with the dog. I was at work and my husband said that the dog, Joe Boy, was just running back and forth. And then he, you know, the light bulb came on. (Ronny?) He wasn't with the dog. And he went down there – of course, he was lying down there, and it stung him enough to knock him down out there in the field. And I was hysterical. I really was. And of course, Ronny was too young to identify who he was. It scared him so bad, you know, and he kept saying it was a car or something like that. So that's how bad it was. Feelings were just running quite high. We went down to the – and there was nothing we could do, you know, he can't identify. I mean they were not sympathetic, you know, feelings were very very high, so we were here during the worst of times really.

MB: And then in June of that year, that's when the board of ed said they would not supply the schools and so my husband and I just sold what we had. We had a rented house. We sold some, gave away some, you know, and paid off whatever bills we had. We loaded our kid in the car and the only thing we couldn't take was Joe Boy. That was heartbreaking, but that's why we left. My feelings when I left here was, I was glad to leave. You know I have cousins who couldn't leave, my aunt couldn't afford to leave or to send them to any place and they were like maybe

12 maybe 5th or 6th grade and by the time school reopened, they were like 17- 18 years old.

Some of them were married.

MB: so, what have you got? You got a bunch of people today that are approaching middle age, no education. They can't find work.

The kids didn't wanna go back with the third grade. Now 5 or 6 years later, they didn't want to go back to 3rd grade. We were fortunate , we could leave, but now everybody is that. I've got cousins today; you know you can tell that they just didn't get their education. That is just unfair.

MB: I say there was a lot of maturing that had to be done on both of our parts, you know.

People would say oh you're from there? Everybody was all of a sudden, we were known and, in the beginning, you know, when we went up there to go to school like 10 – when I went up at 10 years old and I was asked where are you from and I said Farmville 'cause that was the nearest town I was from down the country really. Nobody had ever heard of it. And then we had this infamous hometown. It wasn't pleasant. But I'm hoping that is all behind us. It's a part of our history.

MB: They went to the Historical Society and with that you know historical sites so that they're protected, but still there is a time limit that you're given to be able to buy it. And we just worked very hard trying to get it.

IN: Were you treated any differently by whites after the school's closing?

MB: They treated me alright. I had no problem with that

MB: when I got ready to talk, nobody said nothing. Nothing you can do, ya know

LW: I worked at the Greyhound bus station and they had a colored side and on the white side was tables and chairs and on the colored side was one counter. I was sent over on the white side, and one of the soldiers came out and he bought some magazines and cigs and I served him. I was immediately called into the office. I don't understand today why I wouldn't buy it. As the kids would say, I really blew it. I was angry, because this man, he was very decorated which meant that he served over foreign countries and he put his life on the line for all of us. How could I not serve him? I didn't work very long after that. It was very bad feeling. Both of my kids downtown, they had a counter in where you could go and sit if you were white. They went in and he says for a hot dog. And the waitress told me he said you can buy him a hot dog, but he can't eat anything in here. I was furious. So, I refused to buy it and this child was stretched out. He didn't understand any of it, he just wanted a hot dog.

MB: this place, I liked. It was back on Buffalo Street. We had to go around the block to come into the office. I had went in the front. And people looked at me, "how did you come in?" and I said, "aint that the door you're supposed to come in?" You had to go around the side.

IN: Did you play a role in the movement for desegregation or the new legal school? Did you go to any gatherings or any other meetings?

MB: no, I, when they had the meetings at the time, I didn't go because it was at night.

IN: why do you think Prince Edward County was the only county to close its schools for a significant amount of time?

MB: nobody understand that this was a thing. We were nowhere.

LW: You know, it was puzzling to me, I always thought of places like Mississippi, Arkansas, you know the deep south, its these places like this where this would most likely happen. I mean, there are some people so far down South when you get to Farmville, they think they're up North and for the life of me – but this just shows that people here are very strong-minded and once they make up their minds, there's not even a chance to persuade them. Even today, Virginia just accepted the help from the government for the schools. Virginia wants to be completely independent from the government. Maybe that's why they fought so hard and so long. I don't understand, I'll be honest with you.

IN: How did you come to the decision to leave Prince Edward County?

LW: when the decision came down that schools were not going to be financially supported, that was when our decision was made. We hadn't set a time for when we would go, but when that edict came down, we wanted our sons in school in September. That did it.

IN: what did your relatives and friends think when they learned that you were going to return?

LW: a lot of them were very upset. It wasn't a happy thing. It was a time, not knowing where we were gonna work. We left here with an old '53 Oldsmobile, by the time we paid off all of our bills, we arrived in New Jersey with \$37 left and no job. We went on faith, knowing we were strong and healthy, I will do any kind of work until we can do better. And that's exactly what we did

IN: so, you moved in with your mother?

LW: yea, we lived with my mother. And then in February, we moved into an apartment and in September of '61, was when we were able to get a house. That to me was like moving into a mansion. And of course, we found jobs, you know, wasn't the jobs we wanted, but eventually we found much better jobs

IN: what did you son think about the decision?

LW: most of his friends were leaving. They were going with family members, some to Connecticut, some to Maryland, other parts of Virginia.

IN: Was it better there?

LW: there's no comparison. It doesn't affect your life the same way, because most of the time, like the last house we moved in there, it was like United Nations, there were Egyptians, blacks. It was a nice neighborhood. It didn't affect us the same way.