

CLARKE, NINA HONEMOND (B. 1917)

Montgomery County Historical Society OHP

Interviewer: Lisa Crawley

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This interview is an addendum to Paul Van Nevel's interview with Mrs. Clarke of July 14th. The reason for this addendum was to follow up with questions regarding Mrs. Clarke's family history and her knowledge of migration in her family.

LC: This is Lisa Crawley of the Montgomery County Historical Society on Friday, October 3, 2003 and I am here in the office with Mrs. Nina Honemond Clarke. She was recently interviewed with Paul Van Nevel about her life, and the life of her family here in Montgomery County. And I had just a couple of follow-up questions that I wanted to ask Mrs. Clarke since she was so kind enough to stop by this morning. Mrs. Clarke, I was reading over the interview and I [was] very interested in reading about your family migration to New York or I should say, different members of your family. And I was wondering if you could just tell me a little bit more about it, specifically in the text there is a sister, Ruby, who is mentioned, who you said left from this area and went to New York with your aunt, your mother's sister and if you could tell me how it was that family members migrated from the county to New York.

NC: Well, my mother had three sisters in New York, Emma (Copeland), Della (Copeland), and Clara (Copeland-Walker). They went with white people that they worked for. They moved from Washington, D.C. to New York with white people and my sister Ruby was one that liked to go places so

she asked my aunt if she could come to New York and live with them, and work with them, and that is how she got there. She went up and stayed with Aunt Emma, Aunt Clara, and Aunt Della. They had an apartment together. And that is how Ruby got there. She worked in the garment district, and then she went to school and became a beautician, and she had an awful accident. She was crossing the street and a car hit her and she threw up her hand and the car had wire wheels and her hand got chewed up into the wire wheels of that car and she was never able to practice her profession. She had just graduated to be a beautician. And her hand was crippled and she had to come back home. And she went to D.C. to live and married one of her old boyfriends that she had before she ever left to go to New York. He had a night club on 7th Street. Charlie (Charles) Tindal was his name from Florence, South Carolina. She married him and they left and went to South Carolina.

LC: So she left New York, came back here to this area, married him and they went to Florence, South Carolina. Did she ever work at all again outside of that?

NC: Yes, she worked in his nightclub, she was his cashier.

LC: Did you go to that nightclub?

NC: Yes, my husband and I were there several times after we were married. We went down. I can't remember the name of the nightclub but we did go down.

LC: And, your three aunts who lived in New York, they all lived together?

NC: Yes, they lived together. Della and Emma never got married. Clara did get married and her husband died and she was the baby of the family so they held on to her very closely. She was Pet, that was her baby name my aunts called Aunt Clara. She was Pet and they kept Pet very close, and she never got married again.

LC: Do you know what families they worked for?

NC: Well, I don't remember the names of the families they left with but I do know my Aunt Della was very unique in the families that she worked for. She was the governess for J.C. Penney's son. I mean the J.C. Penney big store, and Della raised the young boy, they called him J. Charles but his name was John Charles Penney. She was his governess until he grew up to be a teenager and left. They sent him to Europe to go to school. Then she left there and she went with the Singer family, the Singer Sewing Machine. She was the companion to Ruth Singer. Ruth was a young girl. She wanted a horse for her birthday and her Daddy gave her a horse and the horse threw her and broke her back. The doctors told Mr. and Mrs. Singer it was 50/50 chance that she would never walk again but she wanted to have that operation so they let her have it and she never walked again. She was in a wheelchair for the rest of her life and my Aunt Della was her companion. She traveled all around the world with Ruth Singer and she even purchased her clothes. Mr. Singer would put my Aunt Della

in a limo and send her downtown to Lord & Taylor and all the big stores in New York to select his daughter Ruth's clothing and she would select many clothing and bring them back and Ruth would keep the ones she wanted and Aunt Della would take the rest of them back to the store. It went on like that until Ruth died. She was in her 40's I guess and she died when my Aunt Della was with her.

LC: Did you go to visit the family much in New York?

NC: I didn't visit anybody but Aunt Della. Aunt Della left the other two and she went to live in the house with the Singers and I was there. I stayed with her a week once or twice.

LC: When did she finish service with those families?

NC: When she retired. She got old and she retired.

LC: Did she come back here?

NC: Yes, she came back here and lived with her brother Sam Copeland. All three of them came back and lived with Uncle Sam.

LC: And where did he live?

NC: He lived on Peach Tree Road [near Barnesville] in Montgomery County. He had, I think, about 22 acres, a small farm, and he lived up there after his wife, Edith died. He was alone and his sisters came and stayed with him.

LC: Is there anything else about your family migration to New York or their living in New York that you would like to share that I haven't asked?

NC: Well, Aunt Clara did marry. She married Ransteen Walker from North Carolina while she was there and one day when she came home from work Uncle Ransteen was sitting in the chair-- he was a redcap on the train-- and he was heating his coffee on the gas stove and he sat in the chair went to sleep and the coffee pot boiled over and put the gas stove out and she found him dead sitting in the chair. He was asphyxiated with gas and then she became a widow. She was only 36 years old and she never married again.

LC: And he was from North Carolina?

NC: Yes.

LC: You said he was a red cap?

NC: Yes, on a train.

LC: So, would that make him a Pullman porter?

NC: Yes, a Pullman porter. She came home from work and she found him sitting dead in the chair dead.

LC: You don't know what train line he was affiliated with?

NC: No, I don't know the train company.

LC: OK. There are some really good Pullman records though, now, that can [be] researched.

NC: His name was Ransteen Walker.

LC: The other question I wanted to ask you was about your genealogy research. You mentioned going to the archives with Eileen McGuckian and researching your family. Can you tell me about that because a lot of people started around the whole Roots phenomenon. Did you start around that time?

NC: Yes, I was encouraged to do my family history after Roots.

LC: OK

NC: I did most of [it] here in Montgomery County and partly in Richmond. My brother did it in Richmond but one day Eileen McGuckian said to me "Come on now, ride to Annapolis." She was doing some research; I don't remember what it was and while I was sitting there, I said "Why am I sitting there doing nothing, let's see if I can find something about my family." And I did. And I went into the records and I kind of yelled-people looking around at me-I'm making noise in the Hall of Records but I did find [out] about my great grandfather. My grandfather's father. His name was John Copeland and I found quite a bit about him. He was the only one I found. I found out who he married.

LC: He was your father's father?

NC: My grandfather's father.

LC: On your fathers—?

NC: No, on my mother's side.

LC: OK

NC: And I did find out who he was. I had no idea who my great-grandfather was but I did. And his children, the diseases that they died with, and the doctors that cared for them. I found just that one person, that was my great-grandfather, John Copeland.

LC: Did you ever put your information together into kind of a formal family tree. You know some people will—?

NC: No, I didn't do a family tree, I got a little booklet.

LC: You do have a booklet? Oh, great.

NC: *Chips Off the Old Block*.

LC: That's what you called it?

NC: Family members are called 'Chips'.

LC: And Mr. Copeland was born where?

NC: My grandfather?

LC: Yes.

NC:* He was born in Montgomery County in Laytonsville. His birth was a little strange. As far as we know his mother was a French woman and his father was a slave and I just wish I could find out why they didn't punish him or do something to him, having a baby by a white woman. But, when I looked for my grandfather's death certificate, it had on there mother unknown. My Aunt Clara said she was a white woman.

LC: Was he raised by his mother?

NC: No, when he was seven years old they sold him into slavery. I guess his color began to change and he began to look black. So they sold him to a man named Joseph White who lived in Seneca. That's down by the Potomac River.

LC: What else do you know about his life?

NC: Well, he did work down there in Seneca for Joseph White and when he was freed the White family owned a hotel. It was called Merchants Hotel in Poolesville, Maryland. They had this hotel and when he was freed from Joseph, he came up into the town of Poolesville and worked at that hotel. He worked in the barn. He took care of the horses, and the carriages, and the wagons, and whatever and my grandmother was also freed in the Poolesville area. She came to work at that same hotel and that's where he met her. She was a maid in the hotel and he married her and they had 18 children. In that 18, there were three sets of twins. They didn't all

live. Nine of her children died and nine of them lived and they lived to their late 80's and 90's. My mother was 99.

LC: You mentioned in the story how your grandmother died and she was a midwife and was going to assist a pregnant women and a snowstorm came up.

NC: Yes, she had pneumonia and died very young and she left three little ones, Aunt Clara, Aunt Florence, and Uncle Harrison. Florence and Harrison were twins. They were the young twins and then Aunt Clara was a baby. My mother raised them. My mother was Sarah. She raised those three little ones.

LC: With your family having so many twins that generation, did twins show up in the family later on?

NC: Yes. My sister Emma had twins, one of them died. My sister Alberta had twins. They grew up to be 60 some years old. One of them is dead. My brother Fletcher had twins. His twins have died.

LC: Did you ever trace your father's family tree? ...

NC: No I wasn't able to. All my father's family is dead but one very aged cousin. That's all I have in Richmond. Everybody else is dead and he had 14 sisters and brothers and they all passed away before we got to know them. We didn't get to know them. My grandmother, my father's mother, her name was Sally Smith and she married Joseph Honemond, my grandfather. She was a runaway slave. She

ran away from her master farther down in Virginia than Richmond. I don't know. And they never did catch her. She got there in Richmond, got mixed up with the... and she lived to be 103. She was part Indian and part black but I don't know anything else. My father passed away before he really could sit down and talk. Every once in a while, he would tell my oldest brother those things about his family and when my oldest brother would think about it then he called me and said, Nina, Papa said so and so and so and then I never did get to talk to my father about his family.

LC: When you were growing up, did you visit his father's family?

NC: No, they came up to Maryland. You know, his mother was so frightened of her master you couldn't get her out of Richmond. She would not leave, she wouldn't come and we were rather poor. We didn't have any money to get to Richmond. She was deathly afraid of that man, even up until the time she died. She was afraid he was going to come and get her and take her back into slavery. She was illiterate, she didn't know, and they couldn't convince her. She was afraid of her master. She ran away and you know what she brought with her was a crystal water pitcher. About that tall. My brother has it on his mantel. He went down in Richmond doing research on our father's family and his cousin said, "You know, there is a lady here in Richmond who was a friend to your grandmother and let's go over there. I think she

has something that belonged to your grandmother. Let's go to see her." So my brother Maxwell and our cousin Elizabeth went over to see this lady, I don't know what her name was and he introduced himself and told her that Elizabeth said she had something that belonged to our grandmother. She said "Oh, yes I have." She went down in the closet and got this-it was wrapped in rags and rags, and rags and rags, down in the bottom corner of her closet. I guess she was afraid that somebody would get it-find it. Anyway, my grandmother gave it to her to keep. She gave it to my brother and my brother took a picture of it and all of us have a picture of that water pitcher that my grandmother brought out of slavery wrapped up in her apron. We don't know the significance of that pitcher, we don't know why she brought that. It had something that was important to her that she would bring it with her.

LC: You said on your father's side that you just have the one aged relative who is still living.

NC: Yes.

LC: In your father's family was there a homestead; some people call it the home place or-

NC: No, they rented all the time. They didn't have a homestead, I don't think, because as mother got older she lived with her daughters; from daughter to daughter and they didn't have a home.

LC: I see. So there was never a family home. O.k.

NC: She lived with her children.

LC: I see. Is there anything else you would like to share about your father's side of the family that I haven't asked?

NC: No, we didn't know his family very well.

LC: As well as we knew your-.

NC: No. We had one cousin, Cousin Alma. She used to come and her sister Lelia Sharp. Cousin Alma was; can't think of her husband's name; but those two would come up and visit with us and stay maybe a week in the summer when I was a little girl. I remember them very slightly. I know Aunt Lelia was a heavy set lady and she was so fat she couldn't lean over and tie her shoes up and we were always tying her shoes up. That's one thing I remember about my father's sister. She was very, very, fat. I didn't know anything about her. She had one son named Josiah.

LC: Alma?

NC: Alma and her last name was Vaughn and she had one son, Josiah. I think he came up to visit with her mother once. We didn't know them. Most of them died, they just died down there. My father had a brother whose name was Samuel, I think, and one of the fellows that lived in our community was in World War II and he was stationed up in Cleveland. Somewhere near Cleveland, Ohio and he met my father's

brother. He was a very old man and sick but he told this boy to tell my father that as soon as he got well he was going to come down from Cleveland and visit with us but we never heard anything from him again. I am sure he must have died but we didn't know anything about it.

LC: Well that's really all I have that I wanted to follow up on. Thank you very much for coming in.

NC: Oh, you are welcome.

*Mrs. Clarke later identifies her grandfather in a follow-up letter as Oscar David Copeland.