

SRC 23

Interviewee: Rev. Curtis Harris

Interviewer: Brian Ward

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W: This is Brian Ward and I'm in Hopewell, Virginia. I'm doing an interview with Reverend Curtis Harris for the University of Florida Oral History Program for the Southern Regional Council Project. It's February 27, 2003. Reverend Harris, thank you very much for spending some time with me today.

H: This is my pleasure.

W: Before we get to your involvement in various forms of movement and activity, just give a little bit of biographical detail about yourself. Tell me about where you were born and raised and educated before you got involved in the movement.

H: I was born in Surry County, [Virginia,] and my birth date is July 1, 1924.

W: What was Surry County like?

H: Surry County was a mill town. They cut logs and fixed them up, but they had a fire in the town a little before I was born. People then had to leave because [they were] looking for work. My father didn't work in the mill, he was a sharecropper, but he had to leave because there was nothing going on in that town. He went to Richmond [Virginia] to take employment.

W: Did the rest of the family go with him?

H: The rest of the family did not go. My mother stayed, and she had five children.

W: Where were you in that?

H: She was pregnant when he left, and I was the one that they were waiting for. My father got very, very frustrated in Richmond. Richmond, for him, was a city. He got all caught up in the city. He came back two or three times, and then he didn't

come back.

W: Prior to disappearing, had he been sending paychecks back to the family?

H: I don't really know what was going on, my mother never discussed it. I was born on the first day of July, and she was expecting him to be home on Fourth of July.

I was born three days before the Fourth of July, so she didn't wire him to let him know that I was born. She said she was making a surprise for him. We lived close to the railroad, so when he used to come home he would get on the back of the train and when the train passed by he would raise a white rag to the children. My mother was in the bed and she could see the train too, and she was holding me up so I could see the train. My sisters and brothers were outside to wave at the train, and when it got to the end of the train he was not there. They went back to wait for another train. They got ready again with their rag, ready to wave at Daddy, but he was not on the train the next time [either]. So my mother told the children, come on in [and] don't worry about it.

W: How did you make ends meet? How did she survive?

H: That's a long story and it's got nothing to do with the Southern Regional Council.

W: I'm intrigued to know how to find a way out of that predicament and how she survived. I guess you were born five years before the crash and the depression; that's tough times. Even if two parents were working, many of the times they would be unemployed.

H: My father didn't come back until twelve years later, [and] by this time we had moved to Hopewell [Virginia]. I was four years old when my family moved to

Hopewell. My mother brought four of us with her and left my oldest brother on a farm with my grandfather, and left my second sister living with a lady who wanted her to stay with her. My mother came with four children and no job, and she became a domestic. The price that they were paying then was \$3 a week. The reason they came to Hopewell [was] because Hopewell was a boom town. Plants were growing up in Hopewell. I had a brother and two sisters here in Hopewell, and we didn't have nowhere to stay. There was a family who had left Surry and they had a house, so they let my mother move in with them.

W: Was that pretty cramped accommodations?

H: Oh, it was crowded, obviously, but people lived that way in the past. You can't do that now. [People say,] go over to the hotel.

W: What sort of schooling did you get as you were growing up in Hopewell?

H: I enrolled at the Carter G. Woodson School. The school started at the beginning, they call it a primer, and then you would go through the eleventh grade to graduate.

W: And you completed your time there?

H: Yes, [I completed my time there].

W: And what came next?

H: I was out of school trying to work. Then I went to Virginia Union [University] and took two years there, and then I got married.

W: What years did you arrive in Virginia Union [University]?

H: I think it was 1954 when I was at Virginia [Union University].

W: What had you done when you went to work? What sort of jobs had you had?

H: [I worked in] labor positions and janitorial jobs like that. You see, that's all you could do in Hopewell.

W: Now, by this time, had your father come back onto the scene?

H: My father came back when I was twelve years old, but he only stayed a month. He accused my mother of not having raised the children.

W: What sort of impact did that return have on the family? That must be pretty traumatic.

H: Well you see, by this time all our family is grown, including me. I'm twelve, but I'm grown. I'm making decisions and so forth. That's the way it was. We lived in several places, too, renting houses and so forth, but that's a long, long story. After the Hills allowed us to stay in their house, I ended up in this area. There were some row houses built right in this area. So the first ten years of my life was in Surry and right in here. We had outside toilets and everything; everybody was doing that. But when I was about ten, we moved to South B Village, which was [comprised of] apartment type houses in a row. It was B Village, because there were some other villages. Hopewell had several villages and that's how you identified them. I lived in South B Village, [and] that was [our] identification. When we got to South B, that was a new experience for me because the toilet was in the house. I remember my sisters explaining to me the commode because I had not been used to a commode.

W: That reminds me to ask, when you were at the Carter G. Woodson School, what

were the facilities like there?

H: Carter G. Woodson [School] was a long building [with] different classes, and then we had the principal's office and the library. They took two rooms and made it the gymnasium. Of course, there was no sign of integration. The white high school was very elaborate. In fact, the building is still there. It's not being used now, but it's still there. They had to deal with the heat with coal heat. They had to go downstairs in the basement and bring up scuttles of coal for each class. They had steam heat at the white school. And when they got ready to put new desks in at the white high school, then they would bring us all of the old ones. We knew what was going on because you know how kids carve on the side of the desks and stuff, so their names were on there. That was a routine at that time.

W: As you were growing up in this segregated Hopewell, were there any African American leaders in the community? Were there any signs of a movement emerging, perhaps particularly around the years of World War II?

H: There was no movement, because during World War II I was a teenager. My older sister and my second sister and my mother turned our house into a restaurant, [so] we were business leaders.

W: I was going to say, you were entrepreneurs.

H: Yes.

W: Did the restaurant do well?

H: Well, we all lived.

W: Was your mother able to give up her work as a domestic at this point?

H: Yes, [she was able to give up her domestic work]. Then later, my mother moved to Norfolk to live with my uncle, her brother, and I stayed here with my sisters.

W: Did you take a part in running the restaurant?

H: Yeah, I used to have to kill all of the chickens. When it was the weekend you would have chicken and pig's feet.

W: This would have been an exclusively black clientele?

H: Oh, absolutely. We didn't see no white people until they would come [for the piccolo]. We had a piccolo. It's a music machine. The man who handled the piccolo would come, and if it had any trouble, well, then he would take the money out and give us our portion of it and put the rest of it in the bag and take it home to his boss. He was white. So we didn't see white folks all that often unless we'd go downtown.

W: So this was like a precursor to a jukebox, I guess.

H: That's what it was.

W: So your connections with the white community were when they came to take your money away [laughing]. Was there an NAACP [National Association of the Advancement for Colored People] chapter in town? Were you aware of it? Were there pastors in the community who you think of as civil leaders?

H: They had an NAACP chapter in there. I don't know when it started, but I was never involved in the beginning of it. There was a black doctor in town and he worked with the NAACP. [His name was] **Dr. Robbins**.

W: Do you remember his first name?

H: **C.A. Robbins**, I think that was his name. He built an office and it's still there. Another doctor has expanded it and is still there. Later on, when they were looking for somebody to take over the NAACP, they selected me in my absence.

W: What year was this?

H: I guess I was in my twenties when that happened, but there were no young folk in the movement.

W: Yeah, it's not like what we think of it in the 1960s.

H: What we were doing, for the most part, was talking about the conditions. We were not involved in no cases up to that time.

W: I'm guessing the community would have been aware of the work of the Charles Hustons [lawyer for the NAACP] and the Thurgood Marshalls [justice of U.S. Supreme Court, 1967-1991] in that period before you get to the *Brown* [vs. *the Board of Education*] decision [1954, called for integration of public schools]. There's some sort of important decisions that the NAACP lawyers win during that ten years before the peak of the *Brown* decision.

H: When something came up, we would wear that out until the next thing happened. There was nothing happening in Hopewell, and as long as nothing was happening in Hopewell we were home free.

W: What about church attendance? Where did the family go to church?

H: My mother went to the House of Prayer, and later my three sisters went to Union Baptist Church, this church, but it was not at this place, it was in another location.

So when I was fourteen they had a tent meeting over in South B Village. They had a little church, **Mt. Carmel Baptist Church**. **Reverend J.G.E. Horns** was the pastor. The church was very small and he wanted to have a revival. It didn't have enough room and he wanted to bring in a celebrity to sing. There was not enough room, so he rented a tent and put the tent on our ballfield out in front of the church. That's when I was converted. By this time, my sisters were involved in the business, so a lady across the street took me back to be baptized. That was in Hopewell, but there was no baptistry in a black church in Hopewell. Everybody was baptizing in the river and in the creek, and some of them had built a baptistry outside, but nobody had a baptistry in town. In that group, in that revival, there were twenty-something people converted. The pastor had a friend in Petersburg at a Tabernacle Baptist church, so they got all of us together [to be baptized]. They had streetcars then, and a streetcar ran right by our church, so we had an excursion to the revival and rented a whole streetcar. We got off the streetcar and walked down to Tabernacle Church on Halifax Street in Petersburg. **Father Gordon** was the minister of that church and he was a friend with **Reverend Horn**, so that's where I was baptized. Then I came back and converted.

W: When did you get ordained? When was that?

H: That's way, way later. I did some other work. I went back to Virginia Union [University] and did another year, I went to Virginia State and did some work, I went to Chicago to do some other work, and I went to **MCV** for a class for

pastors. By this time I'm a minister. [In] 1959, I was ordained into the ministry.

W: Let's take a pause around the first time you got up to Richmond. Obviously, you've come from a pretty rural [area], and then small-town, small-city background. What was the culture shock of going to a much bigger city? How did you deal with that?

H: Richmond was a big city, but even though it was a big city, we were isolated. We had certain areas that we could function in. Second Street was a business area for African Americans and it had two or three hotels and so forth on there. We could go away from the school, [and] we could go down to Second Street. Of course, your parent will say, don't go down Second Street.

W: Was that sort of like the entertainment area?

H: Yes, and the trouble [area]. What I used to do when I was in school at Virginia Union [University is that] I would come home almost every weekend and I would be in South B Village. It was never that much different, to me, between Hopewell and Richmond, except the distance and the fact that I had to catch the bus to get home.

W: During this period, sort of the mid 1950s, you've got the *Brown* decision, the second *Brown* decision, you get the beginnings of massive resistance in Virginia, and then a little bit later you get the emergence of the Montgomery bus boycott and Martin Luther King, Jr. [African American civil rights leader, 1929-1968]. This is a period of great change and tensions. How was that manifested in your own life and in Hopewell, and in Richmond, for that matter?

H: When the *Brown* decision came down I am the president of the PTA [Parent Teacher Association] for the high school, Carter G. Woodson School, that's my school. By this time, we've moved the school from the old original place and put it right down the street. I'm back into Davisville [community in Virginia] again because I'm living in the projects. I'm married and I've got some children. We were having a meeting, and I don't remember whether it was the PTA, but somebody had put that together and I was presiding over the matter. What we were dealing with [was] we were trying to recruit teachers. This was a hard time to get teachers because folks was going into the plants where they could get a better job, I mean make more money. We lost a lot of teachers during that period. At that time, the black teacher's pay was not as much as a white teacher's.

W: Were there other sort of equalization lawsuits, because they were big all over the South?

H: Yes, but they got around that. We got some benefits as a result of it. So I was in a meeting concerning recruiting teachers and I was presiding, and somebody whispered to me to come out. They wanted to tell me that the Supreme Court had ruled equal opportunities in schools. I think there was some white people in that meeting because the white people were having a hard time. The whites didn't do anything about school teachers because all of the school board was white and all of the superintendents were white, but they were concerned that we didn't have teachers. So they must have been in the meeting, also. When I

came back I stopped the meeting so I could make this announcement. It was difficult to handle [and it's hard to] think about what happened in that meeting. The white people didn't know whether to laugh or say I'm happy, and the black people were rejoicing.

W: This may have been too much for some of the white folks at the meeting.

H: I would assume [that's true].

W: That reminds me to ask you, were there any signs from anywhere in the white community in Hopewell of sympathy for the African American predicament?

Was there any signs around the 1950s of wanting to help relieve the situation in any way? Was there any interracial cooperation?

H: The Council on Human Relations was in Richmond, and Happy was directing it.

W: This is [Reverend] Heslip "Happy" Lee [former executive director of Virginia Council on Human Relations and the Southern Regional Council]?

H: You said Heslip, that's his real name, but we just knew [him as] Happy Lee.

W: Yes, and I think he changed it by law eventually.

H: He did. I surely wanted to see him last night, but it didn't happen.

W: He would have been in Richmond with the Virginia Council on Human Relations?

H: That's right.

[Tape interruption.]

W: We were talking about, in the wake of the *Brown* decision and the beginnings of the movement in the late 1950s, the first signs of perhaps interracial cooperation with various councils on human relations. Tell me how you became involved with

those organizations.

H: There were some white people in Hopewell who knew about the Council on Human Relations. I can't think of their names right now, but they had some meetings with some white people and black people. Some people from the Catholic church and some from the Presbyterian church [knew about the council], so we were having some cookies and tea meetings. But that was important.

W: Okay, why was that important?

H: It was important because of the mix. In the black community, people had different kinds of opinions because the people who visited those meetings were African American people who had been educated or had some money.

W: So you got the elite, in a way, from the black community, and they were meeting with the white community. What sort of whites were there? You mentioned the Presbyterians coming out. Were they pretty well-to-do?

H: They were, they were college people. One lady was a nurse [and] one was a chemical engineer.

W: So these are professional people coming together?

H: Yes.

W: Do you remember what the attitude of the majority of these whites were towards desegregation? Had they got as far as recognizing the need to desegregate, or were they still hoping to improve the conditions within segregation?

H: What they were trying to do, I think, was to improve the relationships. These

people were also deeply religious, and they were trying to find ways to have a relationship. They'd been reading their Bible. I think they did all they could do at the time.

W: Did you see them sort of having a conflict? They were Southern whites, and there are certain things that come with being a white Southerner at that time. Then they've got their religious beliefs, which maybe has given them another vision of a way the world could be. They're fearful of federal government, so they're thinking about when change comes we'd like it to be reasonably gradual and we'd like to play a major part in determining that change. Meanwhile, you've got African Americans saying, we'd like it a lot quicker than that. How did you see them working through this?

H: Well, at the beginning, it was a gradual process and there were selected people. They were not selected, but they were the persons who had some relationship with some African Americans for one reason or another. It was really embarrassing for some of the whites to see what was happening. When we started the movement in Hopewell, I went to jail several times. Many white ministers confronted the system. They wrote a letter to the newspaper and put their names on there. There were at least ten white ministers.

W: Would these people have been members of the Council on Human Relations, by and large?

H: No, not by and large. They were [writing letters] when we started doing the movement and having the sit-ins and was going to jail. By this time I was

involved with the Minister's Conference in Hopewell and I was the only African American that was involved.

W: Tell me a bit about how the movement emerged in Hopewell. What were the things you focused on, and what tactics did you use? What help did you get from outside of Hopewell, if any?

H: We didn't have anything happening in Hopewell until we started with the movement. The first thing we did was we developed another civil rights organization. It was not through the NAACP.

W: Was there a sense that the NAACP had served its purpose and it couldn't go any further in certain ways?

H: Yes, [but] they were not against the NAACP.

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W: Did you have overlapping memberships to the organizations?

H: From time to time I was overlapping [in my memberships]. When we started in the movement, I think the first thing we did was to take on the local newspaper because they were writing bad things about us.

W: What was the name of the organization in Hopewell, the new movement?

H: [The name of the new organization was the] Hopewell Improvement Association.

W: Was it modeled on the Montgomery Improvement Association in any way?

H: Yes, because Wyatt Walker [a member of the international religious community, he became head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference], who left Petersburg to join Dr. King, was hoping to have improvement associations

everywhere. Petersburg had one, too.

W: So in a way, it was modeled after that protest?

H: Yeah.

W: And you focused on the newspapers first?

H: We kept on the newspaper and recommended that everybody stop taking the paper. [It was] a boycott.

W: Was this a white-owned paper?

H: Yes, and they sued us for several thousand dollars.

W: What happened in that case?

H: It took a year or so to get to court. After they got to court they forgot to subpoena us, so when they got ready for the case they started calling all of our names and we weren't there. We went to the hotel, and when they found out that we were not there they had to continue the case for the next morning. We had somebody alerting us to what was going on. [They said], y'all are going to have to stay away from home another night. When they got ready to try to subpoena us, they then took the subpoenas and nailed them on our door. But none of us was at home, we stayed all night at the hotel. The next morning when it came to court they couldn't find us, so their attorney was red-faced. We had three black attorneys representing us, and when they [the prosecution] found out that they couldn't go forward with the case and it's been on the books for a year, the newspaper attorney agreed for a settlement. [He said that] if we would give him \$500 that would settle the case.

W: And is that what happened?

H: Yes.

W: Was there a black newspaper in Hopewell? Was there any black press?

H: The Afro-American newspaper was in Richmond, but they had been distributing the papers around.

W: But there was nothing more local than that?

H: No, [there was] nothing local.

W: I'm thinking about black-oriented media. Was there a local black radio station?

H: No.

W: Nothing like that?

H: No, [there was nothing like that]. So we finished up that case and they had to write up a paper to get it all off the books. They agreed that they wouldn't mess with us no more and we don't mess with them no more. [It was] something like that. By this time, the newspaper was losing money because nobody black was buying the paper and the businesses that was trying to advertise to black folk said we don't need to be on the papers if black folks don't take the paper, and they lost their shirt. I didn't know it, that we were so close. How close we were to closing this thing up was that the newspaper was trying to sell the paper.

W: So you had even more leverage than you knew.

H: But we didn't know it. They sold the paper after we settled.

W: What was the name of the newspaper?

H: [It was called the] *Hopewell News*. It's still the same name.

W: What about the other things that the movement tends to focus, on like segregated schooling? Were there lawsuits against the local school board?

H: The first thing we did after the newspaper [boycott was that] we tried to use this old city swimming pool. We couldn't go to it even though it was owned by the city, so we went to the council meeting and offered to buy the swimming pool.

W: Who would have been putting up the money to make that possible?

H: Well, we were going to buy it for \$1 [laughing].

W: This was rejected?

H: Yeah, but they closed the pool.

W: They closed the pool rather than desegregate it?

H: Yeah, they closed the pool and brought in dirt and filled it up.

W: How long before there was a municipal pool that opened on an integrated basis in Hopewell?

H: [That was] way later.

W: Was it in the late 1960s or early 1960s?

H: Yeah, they built a recreation center, and when they built it they had the swimming pool in the house. I opposed, because they got some money from HUD [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development]. I went to HUD and held them up for some time, but HUD did all they could. Everything's got rules and regulations on how you can do what you can do, so I went as far as I could. I was even trying to get HUD to take their money away from them, but that wouldn't fly. The next thing they did, after they decided that they were going to

build a pool, they had some regulations on coming into the pool. [They said,] you've got to have a membership.

W: Right, so that was another means of obstruction.

H: Yes, in fact, that's on now. They've got a situation that says that any kid [coming from a] family [that] doesn't have sufficient income [can] come for no price. So they've done a lot of things to try to do it. Black folk are not interested in the municipal swimming pool, so there's not that many.

W: What else did the Hopewell Improvement Association focus on? What sort of tactics were you using? It sounds like you were petitioning the city authorities. What about direct-action-type things? You mentioned sit-ins?

H: We sued the city to use the cemetery. The cemetery was also owned by the city. We won that one easy. They gave up on that right way, so we didn't do much on that. The cemetery is still open to everybody.

W: Did you target things like restaurants and theaters?

H: Yeah, that's where we did the sit-ins. I don't think we had a sit-in at the theater, [but] we had sit-ins at the restaurants and lunch counters. We never got that done until we had the congress change some laws so that we could use them. The bulk of my going to jail was, about thirteen times, about sit-ins and stuff like that.

W: This would have been in the early 1960s?

H: Yes.

W: Who else was part of the movements? When we think of sit-ins, we often think

of the students in Greensboro [North Carolina] or Atlanta [Georgia] or Nashville [Tennessee]. What sort of members of the community were part of the Hopewell Improvement Association doing these protests?

H: There were some people who were always ready when you'd call them up for something, but I had to call them. I had to start it, and that's what's been going on in Hopewell in my life, starting stuff.

W: Was it sometimes very difficult? I mean, obviously, jails in the South during this period weren't the best of places for African Americans. Was it difficult to encourage people to take part in protests that might lead them to jail?

H: Yeah. Most of the meetings were held in this church, but I was not the pastor, but I was a member. I guess we had seventy-five people arrested in Hopewell on sit-ins and demonstrations.

W: How did the white police and the white authorities handle things? How, physically, were you handled when being arrested? There seems to be a great spectrum of the way in which Southern police handled demonstrators.

H: Well, they never really came down on us in the demonstrations except one time. We had instructions, and one of the workers missed the instructions. We had said that if the police come, you sit at the table. If they say that you are under arrest, go ahead with them. There was one fellow that didn't understand that, so he just kept on sitting. The police grabbed him and he was not nonviolent [laughing]. He grabbed the wrong one, so he and the police had a scuffle in the drugstore for a while. But somebody told him to give it up.

W: Where did you get your training in nonviolence tactics?

H: We got the training. We had different people coming in here from time to time, talking to us.

W: Who would they include? Did you have people from the SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference]?

H: SCLC people would come in from time to time, and sometimes they would have a group coming in from colleges and universities. Then, when we would have a mass meeting, we would put on a demonstration on how to protect yourself.

Leroy didn't understand.

W: That was the guy who retaliated?

H: Yeah.

W: It's amazing that there was so much discipline and that more people didn't do that.

H: He was the only one. People used to say, no, I'm not going, because if anybody spit on me I'm going to war. We'd say, okay, don't you do it if you can't control yourself.

W: By this phase of the movement, obviously there's a lot going on throughout the whole South and there is a sense of a rising tide of activism, and you must have felt more part of a region-wide movement.

H: Yeah, after Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] did the Montgomery [bus] boycott [which led to the U.S. Supreme Court decision that Alabama's laws requiring segregation on buses were illegal], it was in the headlines almost everyday. You

could see pictures and so forth, so we learned some things from the press.

W: By this time, are there any whites in Hopewell, or even from Richmond, who are interested in the movement and taking part in the movement here, or is it exclusively African-American?

H: I had a demonstration at the post office, and I can't remember what it was about. I had several white pastors participating and making speeches at the post office. Then I went to jail and that night they got me out of the jail. One of the pastors came to see me at the jail and he was in revival. He said, if you get out today, come to my church to the revival. [He said,] come to my revival and let my people see what's going on. They had a demonstration at the jail and they made a circle and everybody had black armbands on their arm while I was in jail. It was a prayer meeting for me, and it was early in the morning. I told the preacher when he came to visit me, I said, I'll come out and I'll be over to your church. So we brought some of the demonstrators, and some of them still had their black armband on their arms. When we came in, the white folks didn't know what to do. One of the white ushers went home. When he saw that he went home.

W: What about more generally in the white community in Hopewell? Was this a place where there was very staunch resistance to desegregation, or was it sort of a "wait and see" attitude? How would you characterize the white responses to your movement, if you can? On one hand, was there sort of [Ku Klux] Klan-like activity, or defenders of the state sovereignty and that sort of behavior? How did the white community respond?

H: We had various responses, and of course, by this time, I am a target in the white community. My house had been attacked on two occasions [and we were] getting all kinds of telephone calls from the white community. After they attacked my house, it was all over the radio and television. The chief of police made a mistake, because evidently he was readily redneck.

W: What was his name?

H: [His name was] **Minter**, [but] I think he died. He was the chief and he said, Curtis Harris ought to expect that, and I responded to the newspaper. The news started saying that, that the chief said, Curtis Harris ought to expect that. It took two or three weeks for him to get that off of him. He was saying, I didn't say that, I didn't say that.

W: Presumably, that would have incensed the African-American community. Were there members of the white community who said, that's beyond the pale?

H: Yeah, evidently, because it was the white folk that was giving him a hard time for making that kind of a statement. Of course, at that time, we also had Governor Mills E. Godwin, [Jr., governor of Virginia, 1966-1970, 1974-1978] involved, because we asked for protection.

W: How much protection did you get?

H: Well, he indicated that he was going to give me some protections. Later on, the Ku Klux Klan showed up, because we had another situation where they were trying to locate a dump in the black community. That's when we had a march from the site of the dump to city hall. When we got to city hall there was 150 Ku

Klux Klan members down there in robes. We've got pictures of all of this stuff.

W: Was there any police protection for you?

H: Yes, they were on both sides of the walkway coming up to the city hall door.

They were taking all of the walk, [but] the police split them up. So by the time we got there, there was passage for us and police on both sides.

W: I want to talk a bit more now about your relationship with people like Happy Lee and the Virginia Council on Human Relations. What role were you playing in that organization as the 1960s went on?

H: Happy was gone, and another fellow named **Frank Adams** came in to take his place.

W: He was the executive director of the VCHR?

H: Yes, and we had a lot of relationships. Whenever we were doing something, they would get in with us. So we had a good relationship with Frank.

W: They were based in Richmond, so would you go up to see them? How did that work?

H: I would go to see them, but if we were doing something out in the street they would come to the streets.

W: I want to pause there, because one of the criticisms sometimes made of these councils on human relations was they had a lot of nice meetings and spent a lot of good time talking good ideas, but one of the criticisms is that they didn't really get their hands that dirty when it came to it.

H: Oh, that's true, but it was necessary to have them.

W: Make the best case for why that sort of contribution is so important.

H: If you're building a house you don't start with the roof, you have to have a good foundation. It was a foundation to make a situation so that people could work together.

W: Was it encouraging and empowering for the African-American community, especially people like yourself who were activists or wanted to be activists, to at least know there were some sympathetic whites around them and not everyone was a Klansman?

H: Yes, that was very important and that was helpful. I could call Frank, we spent a lot of time on the telephone. Then, Frank set up the Fred[erick] Douglass Newspaper [Program, named after African American abolitionist leader and lecturer, 1818-1891].

W: It's a journalism, sort of internship-type program.

H: Yes, they got some money from [the] Ford Foundation. Frank was a real activist, so much so [that] he went and got people out of jail and so forth to be in their program.

W: He sounds much more direct-action oriented than some of the others in similar positions in the white community.

H: Yes, [and] he became the director of the Fred[erick] Douglass Journalism Program within the Council on Human Relations, and he asked me to be the acting director.

W: Did that position end up becoming permanent?

H: Yeah.

W: You would have been, I guess, the first African American to be executive director.

H: Yes.

W: Did you get any sense of resentment from any of the white members of the organization at that?

H: No.

W: What year was this that you would have taken over?

H: It was 1964-1965, or somewhere in that area. By this time, the president of the council was a black woman lawyer. There were some people who did ____ job, and they supported me. I went on to the jail with the council. Now, I'm not dealing with the SCLC, I'm dealing with the Council on Human Relations. We had a demonstration down in Suffolk, Virginia, because of discriminations in the employment in the hospital. So I had a demonstration at the hospital and nobody went to jail but me. There's some papers on their involvement. Some of the papers are at the library as we gave a lot of stuff to the library.

W: And this is in Virginia Commonwealth University?

H: Yes, we made copies [for them] and made copies to Virginia Union [University] and to Virginia State. I made copies for each of them. After I left, they never had another director. We figured that there was nothing we could do in that regard, so I left and retired from civil rights [activities].

W: What years would this have been, the late 1960s or early 1970s?

H: That was in the early 1970s. I wasn't doing no civil rights stuff, and I was sitting in my house and they came to see me. There was a strike at one of the plants, and they wanted to have a march. A chief was there and he said, no, you can't have no march. So, while I was sitting in my house, several of the employees knocked on the door and wanted to talk to me. They said, we can't have no march, we're going to tear this town down. These were white and black employees and they were trying to get a contract. They wanted me to help them to make a march. I said, I've got an appointment on the date that you want to have this march, in Richmond. I don't know what I was going to Richmond for, but I had an appointment. But they said they wanted to have a march. By this time, I'm very well-established as an activist by police and everybody else.

W: You're a marked man.

H: Yeah, they're going to have to put me in jail, [and] they knew that. So I telephoned the chief while they were in the house and said, I want to have a march. [He said,] where you going to have it at, Reverend? I said, I want to start downtown and go on through the community. The chief said, okay, we will have somebody to talk with you so that you will have all the details so you'll have no troubles, and I said, okay. I told the guys, all right, the police told us what to do and they're going to give me some information so that I can go ahead and do it. So we set the date and everything. It was soon after the discussion [that] I went and I led the march of about 500 people in Hopewell. We took up the whole street. I don't want to walk on no sidewalk. A demonstration is to take the street.

So we did that, and after that my retirement was over.

W: You were back on the scene.

H: That's right.

W: Did you get arrested on that protest?

H: No, the police were just as kind as could be.

W: Do you think that, in a way, was symptomatic of some changes that had taken place? Who was this police chief? He sounds a bit different from the **Minter** guy.

H: Yes, it's a different chief and things are going along. See, by this time I've been to Washington with Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] [and] I've been to Selma, [Alabama,] so I've got a good reputation.

W: You've got good credentials. Now, one of the things that brings me here is the idea about how these statewide councils on human relations interacted with the Southern Regional Council based in Atlanta. Did the SRC loom large or small in your world during the 1960s?

H: I didn't know about the [Southern] Regional Council until I became involved with the council. I found out that they were financially supporting the council because they didn't have the money. See, there was no money to function with, so we needed the council. That was one of the reasons why the thing was going out of existence when the [Southern] Regional Council decided that they couldn't give the money no more.

W: Right, so when it fell upon hard times in the late 1960s and early 1970s, that had

an effect lower down the chain.

H: Absolutely.

W: Did you know any of the individuals involved with the Southern Regional Council, people like [Leslie W.] Dunbar [director of research for the SRC] or Vernon Jordan [civil rights lawyer who helped organize the integration of the University of Georgia, later became head of the National Urban League] and people like that?

H: I knew them by name, but I had more connections with Vernon Jordan afterward. He had another organization for voter education.

W: That was the Voter Education Project, the VEP, and he was director of that.

H: Yes.

W: Now that was administered by the Southern Regional Council.

H: Oh, okay.

W: It's interesting. What's emerging is that the Southern Regional Council had a secret hand in quite a lot of the things that you were interested in, but didn't really have much identifiable presence.

H: Vernon was the director of VEP and my wife worked with him some.

W: What is your wife's name?

H: [Her name is] Ruth [Harris]. She did that on two or three occasions to try to put that together.

W: Was voter registration part of what you were trying to do here in Hopewell?

H: Yes. I ran for city council seven times and lost.

W: What time in this storyline was that in? Was that through the 1950s and 1960s?

H: Yes, and in the 1970s. I didn't get on the council until 1984.

W: When you did get on council, do you think you had a biracial vote? Do you think there were some whites who recognized what you'd contributed?

H: No.

W: It was just a black vote.

H: The way I got on the council was through a court order using the Voting Rights Act [1965] saying that you can't have these at-large districts. The effect of that, in an area where the majority of the community is white, [is] that you would never get nobody black on the council unless it's one of their boys. Nobody had ever run for city council in Hopewell except me, and I had done it seven times. So I used the Voting Rights Act, sued the city, and they never finished the case. They had a compromise. After I sued the city, the next election they elected a black man.

W: A black man?

H: Yeah.

W: Who was that?

H: His name is **Ray Edmonds**, and he was elected as an at-large council member. He got 80% of the votes.

W: How do you explain this success?

H: Well, let me skip over for four years. While the case was pending, he got elected. Four years later he was defeated in the district with a ward system, because we were going for a ward system. They made a ward particularly for

me. It was 75 percent black. Ray said, through the lawyer, that he didn't want to be in my ward.

[End of side A2]

H: So his ward was only 20 percent black, and four years later he was defeated by a white man. We have documentation of his involvement with the white community because we got all the documents in the court. Our lawyers had put all of them on the witness stand and asked questions of all of the members that was on the council. I still got the documents, so don't be messing with me or I'll call your name.

W: Did your career in municipal government continue in city government?

H: After I got elected, **Ray Edmonds** encouraged one of his buddies, who was in my ward, to run against me in the same election. But I stomped him good. I've been confronted three times during my stay on the council, twice with blacks and one white, and I've whooped them all. I've been there for sixteen years.

W: Just as a concluding question, I wonder if you can sort of summarize the sort of changes that came to Hopewell during your time as an activist and try to place yourself in the role you played in bringing about those changes.

H: I think it was the culminating factor when I was elected to be the mayor of the city [1998] and he was there.

W: What year was that?

H: [That was] five years ago, because I served two years [and] then I've been out two and a half years. That was a culminating factor, because once I became the

mayor and I was selected by six white persons, because there was seven of us on the council, and I have not been able to tell you how I did that. He's a writer too, and he's been writing it up, but he hasn't found out yet how it happened. I think the Lord has something to do with it. That was a culminating factor.

W: That was a culminating factor of all these trends that we've been seeing through the previous forty years?

H: Yes.

W: Thank you very much. I really appreciate it.

H: All right, thank you.

[end of interview]