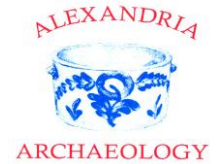




City of Alexandria
Office of Historic Alexandria
Alexandria Legacies
Oral History Program



Project Name: *Alexandria Legacies—Freedman’s Cemetery*

Title: *Interview with Joyce Paige Abney*

Date of Interview: *Summer 2008*

Location of Interview: *Alexandria, Virginia*

Interviewer: *Logan Wiley*

Transcriber: *Logan Wiley; put into oral history formatting by Terilee Edwards-Hewitt*

Abstract: Joyce Paige Anderson Abney is a fifth-generation Alexandrian, descended from Armistead Webster. Mrs. Abney discusses growing up in segregated Alexandria, including schools and swimming pools.

This transcript has been edited by the interviewee and may not reflect the audio-recording exactly.

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Joyce Abney: Courtesy of Char Bah

Introductions and Background

Logan Wiley:	Ms. Abney, were you born in Alexandria?
Joyce Abney:	I was born in Alexandria, in the Alexandria Hospital.
L.W.:	At that time, what was medical care like for black people?
Joyce Abney:	I was a premie [premature birth] and my mother was told to remove me from the incubator so that a white child could be placed in the incubator. I was sent home and [my mother was] told to heat bricks and place them at the foot of the bed to keep me warm. At that time, they had what they called wards. Blacks were put on one side of the hospital and white[s] were put on the other. They [white people] were in private rooms and there were seven or eight of us [black people] in a ward. Many of the nurses were nurse's aides, not R.N.s [Registered Nurses].
L.W.:	You told me your Alexandria addresses (on the Biographical/Interview Form). Describe what your houses were like.

Homes and Schools	
Joyce Abney:	<p>The first house I lived in, until age 10, was at 1005 Wolfe Street and it was a nice little house. It was a frame house and it had shrubbery in the front, and a wooden fence that went around to the back. We had running water. There was no hot water, but there was running water. We had indoor bathroom facilities. It was a three-bedroom house with a living room, dining room, and a kitchen. We had a wood stove and that's how meals were prepared. It was a nice, warm, comfortable house. At that time, I thought it was very comfortable for black people.</p>
L.W.:	<p>Tell me about some of the important events of your childhood and describe the neighborhood in which you grew up.</p>
Joyce Abney:	<p>Well, we grew up in an extended household. My mother, my maternal grandmother, my great aunt, my uncle, and my brother resided at 1005 Wolfe Street. My father did not live in the home but his mother lived around the corner and he lived with his mother. So, I was still in touch with my father and my paternal grandmother. There was a lot of life and it was a happy time for me. I was blessed. I moved to 815 Wolfe Street because my grandmother remarried. When she remarried that is where she and her husband resided.</p> <p>My grandmother raised me, so it was just her second husband and myself. I went to elementary school and high school while living there. I enjoyed it; it was nice and it was comfortable. When I married, I moved to 817 North Columbus Street until I moved away with my husband. I was married at a very young age. I was married at the age of sixteen. I had my first child when I was eighteen years old. My son, my husband, and I lived at 817. My other two children were also born there. My son was born at the old Alexandria Hospital; my oldest daughter and my middle daughter were born at Seminary Hospital — we called it the new Alexandria Hospital. Then, I moved to Washington with my husband and I've resided in D.C. ever since.</p> <p>I went to Miss Martha Miller's kindergarten. My brother and I walked from the south side of Alexandria to the north side of Alexandria. We walked alone after we were taught how to walk to school. Many children did at that time because there were no dangers. I didn't realize until later in life that Miss Martha Miller was a private kindergarten. It was the only private school at that time for blacks and we graduated from the Elks home in Alexandria, Virginia. We did many plays and we learned so much.</p> <p>I attended Lyles-Crouch Elementary School and I attended that until the seventh grade. Elementary school went from the first grade to the seventh grade. Eighth grade to the twelfth grade was at Parker-Gray High School. I attended Parker-Gray High School until the ninth grade. I attended the tenth grade at Cardozo High School in Washington, D.C. Then, I got married.</p>

	<p>The second house at 815 Wolfe Street had three bedrooms, framed, had a backyard, a walnut tree was in the yard, and you could smell honeysuckles. I will never forget that. Today, I love the smell of honeysuckles. We had running water, hot water; and my uncle lived next door with his wife. It was a happy time there. Then, we moved to 817 North Columbus Street. That was a three-bedroom house and it had a backyard. It was on a tree-lined street; it was nice and shady. So, we had very cool mornings. That was it about the houses.</p>
<p>L.W.:</p>	<p>Your earlier comments brought back childhood memories. When I grew up in Cincinnati, we did not have legally segregated schools, but Black students received books and supplies that were in bad condition.</p>
<p>Joyce Abney:</p>	<p>Yes, the schools were segregated and the books were passed down to us from the white schools. Many of them were torn and I remember that the teachers would ask us to tape pages back into the books. The books went home and the parents had to sign for them and write the condition of the books. You had to pay for your books; you had to pay for your supplies. You bought your lunch or you brought it to school, that is the way it was.</p>

Growing Up in Segregation

<p>L.W.:</p>	<p>Describe life in segregated Alexandria and life after segregation.</p>
<p>Joyce Abney:</p>	<p>When I grew up in Alexandria it was segregated, but I think it disturbed me because I was one of those curious children. I often asked my father's mother why we couldn't do certain things. Like go to the closest school. There were two schools that were two blocks from where we lived, but we had to walk several blocks to Lyles-Crouch. We had to cross Washington Street, which was a dangerous street. At that time, they did not have crossing guards, didn't have stop lights, we had to cross that street. I don't remember any child being hit by a car.</p> <p>There were white families in the neighborhood, but they didn't bother us and we didn't bother them. When they came out to play, we played, and when they went in, we went in the house. They left the neighborhood when the white children became teenagers. I never thought about it until now.</p> <p>I remember going with my grandmother to Murphy's [variety store] and we could not eat at the sit-down counter. You could stand at a counter on another side of the store, but not at the sit-down counter. I often questioned why we could not go to the other side of the store to sit down. I was told to lower my voice and to not ask so many questions. Why did we have to do that? We went to the library, which was on the north side, to research or get books. We couldn't go to the white library, which was closer. I looked at it as an inconvenience and unfair.</p> <p>We couldn't go to the swimming pools; in fact we didn't have a swimming pool until I was a teenager. Some children drowned in the Potomac River and</p>

	<p>that was when they decided to build a pool for blacks. It was named in honor of two of the boys who had drowned. However, we still had to walk a long way to the swimming pool. By the time you got there, you really needed a swim.</p> <p>We had two black elementary schools: Lyles-Crouch and Charles Houston. Parker-Gray High School was located on the north side. At first, Parker-Gray High School was the building used as Charles Houston. According to my mother, they renamed Parker-Gray as Charles Houston. My brother graduated from Parker-Gray High School.</p> <p>There were many black churches and I remember one Catholic Church for blacks. It was St. Joseph. It was down the block from our house at 817 and was in the 600 block of North Columbus Street. In addition, it had a school called St. Joseph Catholic School. It was the only black private school at that time. The children attended the school until the eighth grade and then they attended Parker-Gray. In the beginning, we didn't have a stadium at Parker-Gray, so we used George Washington High School's stadium, which was an all-white school. We had to cross Jefferson Davis Highway to get to George Washington High School and it was very inconvenient and dangerous for us.</p> <p>Our teachers were excellent and I received a very good education, considering. Many of the teachers were from the community. They had gone away to college and came back to contribute to the community. So, we knew them. They went to the churches; went to the grocery stores; and anywhere you went, you saw your teachers. You hear that it takes a village to raise a child, and that was the way it was.</p> <p>You couldn't get into too much trouble because someone was always watching. I never played hooky because where was I going to go? The neighbors saw you, and if you were misbehaving, they corrected you. No one dared to say anything back. The news would reach home even before we got a telephone. I remember when we got a telephone and I remember the telephone number to this day.</p> <p>We went to summer day camp at the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] and we learned to play croquet, volleyball, and sewing. They kept us busy with many things to do. On the playground, we learned tennis and I didn't know it would be so much fun. They would practice golf on the field; this wasn't something that you saw all the time with blacks. Many blacks learned to play golf as caddies and my brother was a caddy at the Belle Haven Country Club. That is how he earned his summer money, by working there as a caddy.</p>
<p>Black Businesses and Social Organizations</p>	
<p>L.W.:</p>	<p>What do you remember about black business and social organizations?</p>
<p>Joyce Abney:</p>	<p>I remember some businesses. The Baltimores owned a TV repair shop located</p>

	<p>on South Washington Street. Now they had many Mom and Pop stores and Bank's Auto. We didn't talk that much about businesses.</p> <p>You had the Elks, the Masons, and The Departmental Club [Departmental Progressive Club], a private black club that still exists. My father played in the American Legion band. My grandmother and her sister were in the Eastern Star. My brother and I were in the juvenile division of the Masons.</p>
L.W.:	At that time, did you have many black lawyers, doctors, or dentists?
Joyce Abney:	<p>Yes. In fact, doctors then paid home visits or office visits. Our doctor was Dr. Carpenter and he was on the staff of Howard University Hospital. His office was in his home and he and his wife and children lived there. It was on North Patrick Street with a big home and a nice yard. I remember him because he was so friendly.</p> <p>Doctors were very patient and family oriented. They were very caring people, you know, and you trusted them. There was Dr. Durant and members of my family went to him. We went to Dr. Carpenter.</p>
L.W.:	What about funeral homes?
Joyce Abney:	<p>There was Lewis Funeral Home. When we lived at 815 Wolfe Street, it was across the street. That's where the majority of our family members were taken care of in death. They handled burial arrangements and such. I remember a lady who wrote the obituaries and wrote the obituaries for our family. They would solicit her and she would write the obituaries, until I got bold enough to do it. Because I read many of them and listened to them being prepared, I decided to tell them not to pay her and that I would do it. So, that became my job.</p>
Black Newspapers	
L.W.:	How about black newspapers?
Joyce Abney:	<p>I read the [Washington] <i>Afro</i>. To this day, I still read the <i>Afro</i>. Oh, we loved to go to the Blues Drug Store. We loved to go there because we could sit at the counter. Also, the Carpenters had a pharmacy and that's where our medicine came from.</p> <p>There was the Ice Man. I found out that a friend that I had known, since I was three or four, was the granddaughter of the Ice Man. He would come around and had a sign that said five pounds, ten pounds, fifteen pounds, and twenty pounds. You would select a number and that was the pounds of ice that you got. You would come out with a tin pan because we had iceboxes instead of refrigerators.</p>

School Activities and Attitudes Toward Education	
L.W.:	Were there any other school activities that you wanted to discuss?
Joyce Abney:	I loved to play basketball, I didn't play on a school team. I played on a team at the USO. It was a recreation center. I played basketball. I loved playing baseball—we called it lot ball because we did not have a field.
L.W.:	What was your parents' attitude or philosophy on education?
Joyce Abney:	<p>They stressed two things. They stressed that you went to school to get your education and that you got your high school diploma. Even though they did not talk about college a lot because they didn't dare think that far. You had to go to church. You weren't allowed to do anything else if you did not go to church.</p> <p>At school, we had the school safety patrol and the student council. Safety patrol and student council members were highly respected by their peers. You were responsible to see that students lined up on the playgrounds and they walked in the hallways. We made sure that students went to the water fountain and went back to the classroom. I remember that you had to attend roll call for the safety patrol. We gathered at seven in the morning; circled around the flagpole; and as the flag went up the pole, you pledged to the flag. Then, they called the roll. If you missed roll call, at the end of the week you could not receive a pass to go to the movies for free.</p> <p>There were only two black movie theaters and they were called the Capitol and the Carver Theatre. At the Carver Theatre, they put on shows, just like watching a movie. At the swimming pool, they did water shows just like in the Esther Williams movies. We enjoyed the swimming pool and the movie theater because they had nice programs going on. Even the Elks, they had programs on the stage.</p>
L.W.:	When I was growing up, I was a member of the Boys Club.
Joyce Abney:	Now I was a Brownie, not a Girl Scout, my brother was a Cub Scout, and I remember that they once had a kick off campaign for the Girl Scout cookies. I remember being selected to take a picture with the mayor of Alexandria. My picture was in the <i>Alexandria Gazette</i> . The mayor at that time was Franklin P. Backus.
L.W.:	What was the name of your spouse and children, and their ages?
Joyce Abney:	My spouse now is Ervin Abney and my first husband was Robert Anderson, Sr. My children are Robert Anderson, Jr., who is 49, Robin Boyd, who is 46, Donna Anderson Tolliver, who is 45, and Teresa Anderson Wright, who is 42.
Employment	
L.W.:	What sort of work did you, your spouse, and your children pursue?

Joyce Abney:	My husband is retired, but he worked for the Defense Mapping Agency. I was an elementary second and third grade school teacher. I am a person that did things late in life. I went to the tenth grade and at the age of 40 I got remarried. Then I finished high school. I went to college on a scholarship to UDC [University of the District of Columbia] and got my degree in teaching. They had a teacher's program. I was already working for the Board of Education, as a teacher's aide, and they encouraged me to go to school for a degree and that is what I did. When I was in the seventh grade, my teacher made a great impression on me. When the teacher was absent, I helped the substitute teacher and she wrote the teacher about how I was very helpful. My teacher, Mrs. Edith Allen, said if I like teaching so much, I could help her teach the class. And this encouraged me later in life. I stayed in the school system for 35 and a half years.
Family Traditions	
L.W.:	Describe family activities, especially family reunions, and any family traditions?
Joyce Abney:	We still have family reunions. We have family traditions. At Thanksgiving, we get together and bring a dish and share stories with the younger ones. We want them to know about their family and pass it on. And, so those are the things we do. We take trips together. We encourage the young ones to complete school and go to college.
Advice to Young People	
L.W.:	What advice would you offer to people about life, especially young people?
Joyce Abney:	I would constantly tell young people, even when I was teaching, especially Latinos and African-Americans, to remember who you are and whose you are. Never allow anyone to keep you from being who you are. Your culture belongs to you and you don't allow anyone to take it from you. I teach them to always respect people and listen, even when you don't agree, because you can always learn something. No matter what it is: you may not think that it is important now. But, you will find out later in life that it is very important.
L.W.:	Thank you. [End]