



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



Project Name: *Alexandria Legacies*

Title: *Interview with Celeste Coakley*

Date of Interview: *July 24, 2007*

Location of Interview: *Alexandria, Virginia*

Interviewer: *Laina Schneider*

Transcriber: *Valerie Davison*

Abstract: *Celeste Coakley was born in Alexandria in 1918. She grew up in Old Town and has been a member of the First Baptist Church of Alexandria for 73 years. She recalls shopping at neighborhood stores, playing hopscotch on the sidewalk of Prince Street, walking to school, and going into Washington, D.C. on the trolley that ran along Commonwealth Avenue. She was in the last class to graduate from Alexandria High School, where she played basketball.*

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

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Background	
Laina Schneider:	Your family has lived in Alexandria how long?
Celeste Coakley:	Since the 1900s.
L.S.:	Where were your parents born?
Celeste Coakley:	My father was born in Alexandria, and my mother was born in Woodbridge, which at that time was country.
L.S.:	What type of work did your parents do?
Celeste Coakley:	My mother was a maternity nurse, and my father worked for the Southern Railroad.
L.S.:	And you were born in Alexandria?
Celeste Coakley:	In Alexandria.
L.S.:	When?
Celeste Coakley:	In 1918.
L.S.:	Who was in your household?
Celeste Coakley:	In my household was my mother, my father, one sister, and me.
L.S.:	Who were your playmates?
Celeste Coakley:	I had lots of playmates, because families, then, had quite a few children. So my main playmates, when I was very young, were the Appersons and the Sprouses. They lived on my immediate block, there in Old Town. After you got to high school, you changed your friends, more or less.
L.S.:	Did your parents play any games with you?
Celeste Coakley:	No, not really.
L.S.:	What church did you go to?
Celeste Coakley:	The First Baptist Church, in Alexandria. I've been a member there for seventy-three years.
L.S.:	Did you have a set dinner-time?
Celeste Coakley:	Always. We had a set dinner-time. It was 6:00.
L.S.:	What did you talk about at dinner?
Celeste Coakley:	I usually argued with my sister. That was the usual conversation.
L.S.:	What did your parents stress most? Hard work, religion, career, family?

Celeste Coakley:	My father didn't stress much of anything. He was an avid fisherman, and he did teach me to fish. But he didn't take a big part in our lives. But our mother was very dedicated to her church, and we had a lot of religious training.
L.S.:	Did you ever feel discrimination growing up?
Celeste Coakley:	Never.
L.S.:	Who handled the finances at home?
Celeste Coakley:	My mother.
L.S.:	Did you get an allowance?
Celeste Coakley:	No. If I did a job, I got paid for it. But I didn't get an allowance.
L.S.:	Who was the best cook in your household?
Celeste Coakley:	My mother was the only cook in my house.
L.S.:	Do you still cook any family recipes?
Celeste Coakley:	Not anymore. I did until a year ago. But most of the recipes that I cooked were from my husband's family. My mother was a bread-and-potato person, but the Coakleys cooked fancy.
L.S.:	What was a big holiday of celebration for your family?
Celeste Coakley:	Christmas time was the biggest. As a child, we always went to Woodbridge, to my grandparents. After I was married, my house was "the household," and we always had Christmas dinner here, for everybody in the family.
L.S.:	For just your side of it.
Celeste Coakley:	Both. Both sides.
L.S.:	Do you still celebrate these occasions?
Celeste Coakley:	Yes. My family celebrates holidays, so far, together. With everyone getting older, and retiring, and moving away, that may change very soon.
L.S.:	When did you leave home?
Celeste Coakley:	When I got married. In 1940.
L.S.:	As a child, where did you live?
Growing Up in Old Town	
Celeste Coakley:	I lived in Old Town, Alexandria.
L.S.:	Describe your neighborhood.
Celeste Coakley:	It was what we now call townhouses. We called them row houses. Where I lived was red brick, very wide, two stories high, and all the

	other houses on the block were different. I grew up on Prince Street, and we had doctors, schoolteachers, councilmen...It was a very diversified neighborhood. Very nice.
L.S.:	Did other ethnic groups live in your neighborhood?
Celeste Coakley:	We had no ethnic groups in my neighborhood.
L.S.:	Did your house have a yard?
Celeste Coakley:	We had a back yard. In the front of all the houses, the steps were directly onto the sidewalk. We had back yards.
L.S.:	So there wasn't that much space to play.
Celeste Coakley:	No. We played on the sidewalk. We played hopscotch, and developed little pictures, which y'all don't have nowadays. We had little tiny frames that were like one to two inches across. I don't know what we put in them, but we'd lay them out in the sun and they would develop a picture. I don't think they have anything like that now.
L.S.:	Did your family move, or did you grow up in the same house?
Celeste Coakley:	My family moved while I was in high school. Then I didn't move again until I got married.
L.S.:	Were there popular neighborhood games played by children?
Celeste Coakley:	The thing I remember most was hopscotch. We used to mark up the sidewalk. Do they still play hopscotch? Yes. Well, that's the thing I remember the most.
L.S.:	Did your family entertain at those family gatherings, in your home?
Celeste Coakley:	Not as much as I did after I was married.
Markets	
L.S.:	What stores did you go to?
Celeste Coakley:	What stores? Local and neighborhood stores. We didn't have malls when I was growing up. The grocer was a corner grocer, and my mother called in her order and they delivered it. Because we didn't have a mall. And the drugstore was a corner drugstore.
L.S.:	How were you treated in stores during segregation?
Celeste Coakley:	Well, of course, I was out of school before schools were integrated. I never had a problem with segregation or integration. Never had had a problem...thank goodness.
L.S.:	What African-American-owned business do you remember?
Celeste Coakley:	I don't remember any African-American businesses. I do remember, when I was very small, we had a black woman who came every

	week and picked up all the dirty clothes, took them and laundered them, and brought them back. She'd wheel them back in a red wagon.
Travel	
L.S.:	How often did you travel into Washington, D.C.?
Celeste Coakley:	Frequently, after I hit my teens. Because we'd go in on Saturdays, have lunch, and go to a movie over there. We kept that up after I was married, for maybe ten years. Then Alexandria got bigger and bigger, and the local economy had what you were looking for. So we didn't go to Washington.
L.S.:	What type of transportation did you use?
Celeste Coakley:	As a child, I rode the streetcar, which ran right up Commonwealth Avenue. Then they took it away. I wish they'd bring it back.
School	
L.S.:	For elementary through high school, where did you go to school?
Celeste Coakley:	I went to Lee School, Jefferson School, and I graduated in the last class from Alexandria High School. After that, they had the new T.C. Williams High School.
L.S.:	Did you walk to school?
Celeste Coakley:	Always. There were no school buses. So wherever you went to school, your family either had to get you there or you walked. And I walked.
L.S.:	Describe the school building and the surrounding area.
Celeste Coakley:	Well, the school, except for the high school, is still standing. They were very attractive, and well-maintained. The grounds were always clean. They were never a problem. And there was never a problem in the schools. In those days, when the teacher said, "Sit up," you sat up. There was no argument. I don't ever remember friction in school.
L.S.:	What grades were taught in school?
Celeste Coakley:	Grade school was through the seventh; then you went straight to high school. We didn't have an eighth grade. High school was nine, ten, eleven and twelve.
L.S.:	How many students were in your class?
Celeste Coakley:	If I remember right, I would say close to thirty.
L.S.:	What subjects were you taught?
Celeste Coakley:	English, and math, and history...European history...and home ec[onomics]. We had advanced sciences...not like they have

	now...but we did have some advanced science classes, and advanced math.
L.S.:	Who were your favorite teachers?
Celeste Coakley:	I had one teacher who was just unbelievable. She was an English teacher. I had her in high school...Charlene Kirakov...and her thoughts on life, she gave to her students. She was the best teacher I ever had.
L.S.:	Did you have to take gym classes, or play team sports?
Celeste Coakley:	We had to take gym, and the team sports were your choice. I played basketball for four years.
L.S.:	Did you belong to any clubs?
Celeste Coakley:	All of them. [Laughs] All of them.
L.S.:	What were some of them?
Celeste Coakley:	Well, we had Pep Club; we had the Military Club; we had the Cheerleaders Group. Then we had a History Club, we had a Science Club, and we had a Math Club. And I was in all of them. I just liked doing things.
L.S.:	Were you ever in a school play?
Celeste Coakley:	No.
L.S.:	Did your parents take an active role in your education?
Celeste Coakley:	No.
L.S.:	What is your most vivid school memory?
Celeste Coakley:	My graduation. My graduation was held in the Masonic Temple, and at that time it was the only activity that had ever been in the Masonic Temple that wasn't a Mason-sponsored thing. But we had outgrown the auditorium at the high school. Our graduating class was too big. I don't know who had the influence, but we graduated from the Masonic Temple and I made a speech from the stage of the Masonic Temple. So that's my highlight. [Laughs]
L.S.:	Do you know how many were in your graduating class?
Celeste Coakley:	No, but it wasn't very big. My guess is probably fifty or sixty.
L.S.:	If you did, where did you go to college?
Celeste Coakley:	I didn't. I got a scholarship to William & Mary, but I wasn't able to go because of a family situation.
L.S.:	Did you have difficulty leaving home?
Celeste Coakley:	None. I was ready. [Laughter]

Religion	
L.S.:	What faith was your family?
Celeste Coakley:	Baptist.
L.S.:	How often did you go to church?
Celeste Coakley:	<i>Every Sunday!</i> My grandfather, on my mother's side (because all the religion is on my mother's side, not my dad's)...my grandmother was head of the Missionary Society, and she was the one who trained the choir...not that she was that good, but it was a country church, and my grandfather was a lay minister. So we went to church every Sunday.
L.S.:	Yes. How long was the service?
Celeste Coakley:	Well, I had to go to Sunday School first, and the Sunday School was an hour, and the church service was an hour.
L.S.:	Did you go to an integrated church?
Celeste Coakley:	We didn't have integration then. I'm still in the Baptist church, and the church has moved and built a much bigger church. It's strange. There's one black woman whom I see there all the time, but I never see another one. Of course, the black people in Alexandria have their own, wonderful churches.
L.S.:	Really?
Celeste Coakley:	I don't think they have a desire.
Parents	
L.S.:	What was your relationship like with your parents?
Celeste Coakley:	Very good. My father, I didn't have a close relationship, because his personality wasn't one that you got close to. But my mother I was very close to, and everybody who came in and out of the house was very close to my mother.
L.S.:	Did your mother pass down [unclear] or stories to you?
Celeste Coakley:	No.
L.S.:	At what age did you start participating in household chores?
Celeste Coakley:	Well, as long as I lived at home I never did. I didn't know how to boil water when I got married. I really didn't. My mother always said I was so involved in doing so many other things (this is her story, not mine) that I never had time to learn. But that's not true. I think my mother just didn't want to teach.
Activities	
L.S.:	What type of games did you play?

Celeste Coakley:	In high school I played basketball for four years. Our league was what it is now...Herndon, Chantilly, Oakton. That was the league the girls played in. What we usually did...the girls played the preliminary game, and the boys played the game afterward. So we always had to be there early, because we kicked it off. Also, I was [the] highest ranking officer in girl Cadet Corps.
L.S.:	When did you start dating?
Celeste Coakley:	In my second year of high school I met the man I married. We dated through high school. He went to VMI, and we dated while he was in college. Then we got married.
Values	
L.S.:	What type of rules did your parents give you?
Celeste Coakley:	...My father was not involved, and my mother and father were divorced when I was in high school. But my mother never laid down fixed rules. But [if] I were going to be later than she thought I should, I called. I was very faithful, so she never really laid hard rules down. It depended on where I was going and what I was doing.
L.S.:	What did you want to be when you were growing up?
Celeste Coakley:	When I was growing up I think my aim was to be the world's best secretary. I thought that was so exciting.
L.S.:	Who did you admire most, growing up?
Celeste Coakley:	Who did I admire the most? Well, the man I think I admired as much as anybody was Franklin Roosevelt. I just thought he was a wonderful human being, and he did so much for people.
L.S.:	Did you feel pressure to get married?
Celeste Coakley:	No, not at all. I didn't get married until I was twenty-three. So I didn't rush into it.
L.S.:	Did you work, before or after marriage?
Celeste Coakley:	I worked before, and I worked for a year afterwards. I worked until my first child was born.
L.S.:	How many children did you have?
Celeste Coakley:	Two.
L.S.:	Do you think your career options were limited?
Celeste Coakley:	Very.
L.S.:	Did you feel discriminated against because you're a woman?
Celeste Coakley:	I wasn't personally, because I worked for a friend, and where I worked before I was married was for a friend. When I went back to

	work afterwards, years later, it was for a friend. So I was never discriminated against. In fact, I was treated maybe a little better, because of friendship.
L.S.:	What goals did you want for your children?
Celeste Coakley:	What goals? To be happy.
L.S.:	What values did you stress?
Celeste Coakley:	Don't tell me a fib. Even if what has happened is bad, tell me the truth and let me cope with it. Don't tell me a fib.
L.S.:	I think that's that.
Celeste Coakley:	Okay. [End]