



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



**Project Name:** *Alexandria Legacies*

**Title:** *Interview with Leonard 'Len' Collins*

**Date of Interview:** *August 1, 2012*

**Location of Interview:** *Mr. Collins's home in Alexandria, VA*

**Interviewer:** *Barbara Murray*

**Transcriber:** *Barbara Murray*

**Abstract:** Leonard 'Len' Collins moved with his family to Alexandria as a toddler in the early 1940s, and has lived in Alexandria most of his life. He grew up in three Alexandria neighborhoods: Del Ray, Dominion Gardens, and ParkFairfax, and was educated in six Alexandria schools before leaving for military school (VMI). Later, he returned to Alexandria and has lived here most of the time since then. For the past eight years, Mr. Collins has served as a docent at Fort Ward Museum. In this interview, Mr. Collins shares memories of his family, homes, neighborhoods, and schools. He tells us about watching the Four Mile Run floods and later, as a Boy Scout, rowing around helping flood victims; the airport job he held as a teenager; what life in the 50s was like for a teen in Alexandria; and his decisions to go to VMI and later return here. He talks of how Fort Ward looked when he was a boy, the 1960s restoration, and current interest in commemorating the community established at the Fort after the Civil War. Kathryn Collins, Mr. Collins's mother, has also been interviewed by Alexandria Archaeology.

**This transcript has been edited by the interviewee, Len Collins in September 2012, and may not reflect the audio/digital recording exactly.**

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**Leonard Dimond Collins, 2012**  
*(Credit: Barbara Murray for Alexandria Archaeology)*

### **Introductions**

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| Barbara Murray: | I'm Barbara Murray from Alexandria Archaeology and I'm here on August 1, 2012, with Len Collins:, at his home, to interview him for the Oral History program. And my first question, Mr. Collins, is do you agree to be interviewed and do you give permission to be taped for this? |
| Len Collins:    | I do, yes.   |

### **Earliest Memories of Alexandria: Moncure Drive/Taylor Run**

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| B.M.:        | We'll start with your first memories of living in Alexandria. You were born in Massachusetts, but you lived in Alexandria for most of your childhood years.                   |
| Len Collins: | Yes, most of childhood.   |
| B.M.:        | And you and your parents moved to Alexandria when you were just two. Then you lived there...  |
| Len Collins: | Well, actually we moved to Arlington over on 23 <sup>rd</sup> Street and then at some point in '42 we moved out to Moncure Drive along Duke Street behind the Masonic Temple. |
| B.M.:        | That's in that, what we call today Taylor Run.  |
| Len Collins: | Oh, OK.   |
| B.M.:        | Did you call it that at that time, or Shuter's Hill, or do you remember?  |
| Len Collins: | I don't recall.   |
| B.M.:        | You were too young—maybe you were about two or something like that?   |
| Len Collins: | Yeah. I honestly... Yeah. I was probably two and a half, or maybe three.  |
| B.M.:        | Do you remember anything from that time period?   |

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| Len Collins:  | I'm not sure I remember it or not, but my father worked for the old Pennsylvania Central Airlines and he arranged to have an engine shipping box shipped to the house. And he stuck it out in the back yard. And I remember all the kids in the neighborhood...I mean, that was really a big deal at the time. You know, you had this big huge plywood box that everyone could play in. So.             |
| B.M.:   | That's fun. All the kids would come over.   |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah.   |
| B.M.:   | How long did you live there? You weren't going to school yet, right?  |
| Len Collins:  | No, I think we only lived there for a couple years at the most.   |
| B.M.:   | OK. Pre-school.   |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah.   |
| B.M.:   | Do you remember anything about what it looked like, the neighborhood looked like at all?  |
| Len Collins:  | I remember that there was a creek behind the house, and the reason I remember that was I was always falling in the creek and my mother would take great exception to that! (laughter) But it was a construction area. All of the houses were new at that time. And so on either side of us there were housing going up, and there was nothing behind us except the creek and the woods, so that was it. |
| B.M.:   | Were you near the train at all? Did you hear the trains going by? Were you still near them?   |
| Len Collins:  | I don't remember.   |
| B.M.:   | Oh, you don't remember that.  |
| Len Collins:  | No.   |
| B.M.:   | How about the house. Just you and your parents lived there?   |
| Len Collins:  | Yes.  |
| B.M.:   | And do you remember where you slept, and if you had a room of your own?   |
| Len Collins:  | I probably had a room of my own. I don't remember it at all but I am pretty sure I had a room of my own.  |
| B.M.:   | OK. Anything else about that area that you remember? Anything in particular about that home or living over there?   |
| Len Collins:  | Not a whole lot. I was still fairly young then. One thing I do remember. My dad worked at the airline. And there was an accident over there and someone dropped a bottle of acid, and my father got splashed a little bit—you know, spots around his face and upper body. I remember him coming in. He was all wrapped up in bandages like a zombie or something. That was...I remember that.           |
| <b>Working for the Airline, and Impact of Father's Work</b> |   |
| B.M.:   | There's a question I was going to ask you later, save for later, but it's already come up twice here. Was the fact that your father worked at the airline, if that sort of impacted your life in a way you could remember as a child? If there were things...you already told us one of them.   |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah. As a child, no. As a young adult, it did. I got a summer job at the airlines one year, and I also had pass privileges. So when I was home for Christmas or you know, during vacation time, I was able to fly off to visit   |

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|   | friends in Fort Worth and Chicago and all those places. That was great!   |
| B.M.:   | Are you talking about...were you living in Alexandria at that time?   |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah.   |
| B.M.:   | So approximately when was that, when you had that job?  |
| Len Collins:  | Probably '57, '58, up till...it was, so, probably up to '58, because that's when I turned 18 and that's when the pass privileges went bye-bye, which was, that was a real blow to me! (laughter) Anyway. Yeah.  |
| B.M.:   | So what were you doing, at the airline?   |
| Len Collins:  | I was a stock clerk and worked in the radio shop. And that was before all the innovations in wrapping—you know, the peanuts, the cellophane-type peanuts and that. I mean, had to use cardboard and wrapping paper and tape to wrap the radios. So that was definitely different. And then, by then, Pennsylvania Central Airlines had become Capital Airlines, and they had purchased Vickers Viscounts from the UK. And I remember all of the parts came packaged in <i>cosmoline</i> , which is a real thick, gooey mess, basically. And they had a drum set up in the hangar. And there was a fire under the drum that heated some type of a dissolvent that would rise up and then dissipate, and you'd take the parts in <i>cosmoline</i> and you'd stick them in this basket with a handle on it, and you'd hold them down in the drum where this dissolvent would dissolve the <i>cosmoline</i> . And that made for an extremely long day! (laughter) |
| B.M.:   | Sounds like it! And I can imagine doing something like that on a hot day...it would be very...  |
| Len Collins:  | Oh yeah. Oh, a hot day was just delightful over there! (laughing)   |
| B.M.:   | Did it have a smell to it, or something like that?  |
| Len Collins:  | (laughing) Yeah. Yeah!  |
| B.M.:   | Wow, that's really interesting. I've never heard of that. So then you'd have to dry them, I guess, after that, or something?  |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah. You'd...yeah, we'd dry them off, and then we'd stock them in the bins.  |
| B.M.:   | We're getting a little off the topic here but it's very interesting. It was a large, what, big warehouse or something like that?  |
| Len Collins:  | It was in the hangar, Hangar 5 over at the airport, over at National Airport. And yeah, there were just long rows of bins on either side, and you'd take them down and find the appropriate bin and drop them in.   |
| <b>Changes to the Moncure Drive/Taylor Run Area</b> |   |
| B.M.:   | Let's go back to the neighborhood. Just one last question about the Moncure, the Taylor Run area. I just wondered if you'd been back over there lately.   |
| Len Collins:  | I have driven through there a couple times. Yeah.   |
| B.M.:   | And you noticed—what have you noticed that's changed?   |
| Len Collins:  | I noticed there are trees. The neighborhood seems to have matured, and people have started building on additions to the houses. The houses were pretty small, as I recall.  |
| B.M.:   | Were those, Taylor Run, East and West Taylor Run Parkway, those roads, were they there at that time? The ones that are there now?   |
| Len Collins:  | I honestly don't remember.  |

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| B.M.:  | It was a long time ago.   |
| Len Collins:                                       | Yeah.   |
| <b>Move to Del Ray in Mid-1940s</b>                |   |
| B.M.:  | I wanted to move on. You lived in Del Ray next, right?  |
| Len Collins:                                       | Mm hmm. Randolph Avenue.  |
| B.M.:  | Right. Was that 104?  |
| Len Collins:                                       | 120 Randolph Avenue.  |
| B.M.:  | 120, OK. And this was still during World War II.  |
| Len Collins:                                       | Yes.  |
| B.M.:  | How many years, do you remember how old you were? You might have to think which school...   |
| Len Collins:                                       | Probably about 4 till I was maybe 7 or 8.   |
| B.M.:  | So early elementary years.  |
| Len Collins:                                       | Yeah. Early elementary  |
| B.M.:  | ...the two houses--the Moncure and the Del Ray—were the ones you lived in during World War II. Did the fact that it was World War II have any bearing on the way you lived your lives there, the things you played or thought about or talked about?  |
| Len Collins:                                       | Well, my aunt and her son came down from Massachusetts to stay with us several winters. Her husband was killed in the war. And so that impacted, in that we had had family living with us.  |
| B.M.:  | This was your mother's--  |
| Len Collins:                                       | My mother's sister. Yeah.   |
| B.M.:  | What was it like having them there? Was that, did that change what you did?   |
| Len Collins:                                       | No. My cousin, Frankie, well, he was about four years younger than I was, so I had someone to boss around or complain about or something like that (laughter) so, but other than that, no.  |
| B.M.:  | ...I just, I asked you the Pennsylvania Central Airlines question already....   |
| Len Collins:                                       | Yeah.   |
| <b>Mount Vernon Elementary School in Mid-1940s</b> |   |
| B.M.:  | So, you were starting school already at this point?   |
| Len Collins:                                       | I started at the original Mount Vernon Elementary School, which is where the playground is on the side.   |
| B.M.:  | There was one, it was at 1900 at one point, and then it went to 2400...   |
| Len Collins:                                       | Yeah. It was beside—as you face the school now, it was on the right—on the left.  |
| B.M.:  | Facing it on Mount Vernon?  |
| Len Collins:                                       | It faced on Mount Vernon.   |
| B.M.:  | Then it would be on the left of where it is now.  |
| Len Collins:                                       | On the left, yeah. And...   |
| B.M.:  | Do you remember what the school looked like?  |
| Len Collins:                                       | Yeah. It was red brick—It was, I think it had three floors but it could be two floors, but it was red brick and it extended all the way to the back on the lot. It was a long, thin building. And I remember—I don't remember what class it was probably 2 <sup>nd</sup> grade, but I remember one of the classes had a perfect |

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|              | view out the side window of workers building the present day Mount Vernon School. So you know, we would sit there and watch the progress out the window.                              |
| B.M.:        | How did you get to school? Did you walk?  |
| Len Collins: | I walked.   |
| B.M.:        | Could you show us? Do you remember how you used to walk? Or did you vary your route?  |
| Len Collins: | Yeah. My mother was always hovering around so I didn't do a whole lot of variations! But down Randolph Avenue, turned left, walked up Mount Vernon...                                 |
| B.M.:        | It's probably easy to show us [map sound] once we locate it. Here's Mount Vernon. [map discussion]  |
| Len Collins: | OK. Walked down Randolph, crossed Mount Vernon where my mother would watch me cross, and then I could walk up Mount Vernon to the elementary school, which was at Mount Vernon...     |
| B.M.:        | Mount Vernon, here...   |
| Len Collins: | OK, which was on Uhler. Yeah, Mount Vernon at East Uhler.   |
| B.M.:        | Oh, right here where the library comes in.  |
| Len Collins: | Yeah.   |
| B.M.:        | And your mom was with you. Do you remember anything you were learning about in the school? Do you remember anything about the classes themselves, or how many kids were in the class? |
| Len Collins: | I don't. I don't remember at all.   |
| B.M.:        | Do you know anybody that you knew at that time? Kids that you knew?   |
| Len Collins: | No. (laughing) No.  |
| B.M.:        | How about—probably this was too young for clubs and things like that at that time?  |
| Len Collins: | Yeah. I was in the Cub Scouts, I remember.  |
| B.M.:        | Oh, Cub Scouts, OK. What kinds of things did you do?  |
| Len Collins: | Crafts projects, that type of stuff. That was, that seemed [unclear], I remember. (laughing)  |
| B.M.:        | Let's see, do you remember what grades went to that school at that time?  |
| Len Collins: | I don't. I was in first and second, I think.  |
| B.M.:        | Did they have kindergarten? Did you go to kindergarten?   |
| Len Collins: | No.   |
| B.M.:        | No kindergarten. And did your mom work at this school, also? I know she did some volunteer...   |
| Len Collins: | She did some volunteer work there. And I know she was a Cub Scout den mother.   |
| B.M.:        | Oh, she was a den mother as well.   |
| Len Collins: | Yeah.   |
| B.M.:        | So did you remember her for this, when she was volunteering at the schools did you see her there, or did you see her preparing for...   |
| Len Collins: | I don't remember.   |
| B.M.:        | How about...do you remember any differences between living there and the  |



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|   | next place on Moncure Drive that would strike you about the neighborhoods?   |
| Len Collins:                                    | No, not really.  |
| B.M.:   | Anything else about that neighborhood in particular—any sights, or sounds, or what you saw people doing at home at that time?  |
| Len Collins:                                    | No.  |
| B.M.:   | If you think of something later, you can also add it.  |
| Len Collins:                                    | OK.  |
| <b>Move to Dominion Gardens in Late 1940s</b>   |  |
| B.M.:   | And so, you continued growing up. And you then left when you were maybe seven or eight, is that right?   |
| Len Collins:                                    | Yeah. Probably around eight when we moved out to Florence Drive.   |
| B.M.:   | Dominion Gardens. Was that Alexandria?   |
| Len Collins:                                    | That was Alexandria, yeah.   |
| B.M.:   | And how long did you stay there? Do remember how old you were...   |
| Len Collins:                                    | Maybe four years. Three or four years.   |
| <b>George Mason and Charles Barrett Schools</b> |  |
| B.M.:   | Do you remember what school you went to at that time?  |
| Len Collins:                                    | I transferred to George Mason.   |
| B.M.:   | So George Mason at that time was...so, we're talking about George Mason elementary school. And for the whole time you were there you went to George Mason?   |
| Len Collins:                                    | No. I was only at Mason for maybe a year and then they built the new Charles Barrett elementary school and I started going there.  |
| B.M.:   | And then you stayed there for the whole rest of the time that you were at Dominion Gardens.  |
| Len Collins:                                    | Yes.   |
| B.M.:   | And do you remember what grades these were—was Charles Barrett just the elementary school, it just went to sixth?  |
| Len Collins:                                    | Seventh grade. Wait a minute—yeah. Seventh.  |
| B.M.:   | Seventh grade. What about these two schools, as far as how you got there. Did you also walk?   |
| Len Collins:                                    | I took a bus to George Mason.  |
| B.M.:   | Was that a school bus or a public bus?   |
| Len Collins:                                    | Probably a school bus but I don't remember. And to Barrett I walked. Walked down Glebe Road to Martha Custis Drive.  |
| B.M.:   | Is there anything you remember in particular about your walks or bus rides to school?  |
| Len Collins:                                    | Well, that was when the old Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac railroad was still operating, and the train would come along. It paralleled Glebe Road and went behind the elementary school. And I remember we'd always take pennies and stick them on the tracks on the way home and we'd stop to see if we could find the pennies again (laughing), but other than that... |
| B.M.:   | Interesting. It must have been interesting—did you all like to watch the trains?   |

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| Len Collins:  | Oh, yes.  |
| B.M.:   | The noise was annoying, or fun?   |
| Len Collins:  | I remember living there, you know, the train was right across the street, so we heard it. But it didn't make a whole lot of impact on us.   |
| <b>Four Mile Run, Floods, and Helping Flood Victims</b> |   |
| B.M.:   | That was near Four Mile Run, also, right?   |
| Len Collins:  | Yes.  |
| B.M.:   | So did you play down there?   |
| Len Collins:  | Oh, yes. And I fell in Four Mile Run several times, so...   |
| B.M.:   | (laughing)  |
| Len Collins:  | I seem to have this water habit! (laughter)   |
| B.M.:   | What was down there? Was it just park area?   |
| Len Collins:  | Unkept woods. I remember there was an island, right where present-day Glebe Road crosses over Four Mile Run. And there was an island there, and there was an old house that was in the process of falling down. And I remember we would go down and look around the house and play around in there. But...                        |
| B.M.:   | You went inside? You and your buddies went inside and checked things out.   |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah. And I remember during one of the floods, the island and the house disappeared! So, it was just washed away!   |
| B.M.:   | Wow! (laughter)   |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah, wow!  |
| B.M.:   | That area flooded quite a lot at that time.   |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah, it did, until they opened the underpass under Potomac Yards, widened the access for the creek going under Potomac Yards. It would always back up there. All the way up to Mount Vernon Avenue.  |
| B.M.:   | Wow.  |
| Len Collins:  | And that whole Arlandria area would flood. And I remember as a Boy Scout we would get rowboats and we would row around assisting people who were having a problem with flooding.  |
| B.M.:   | Would you take them somewhere?  |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah. Right.  |
| B.M.:   | Or bring things to them? That's wonderful.<br>How high would the water get?   |
| Len Collins:  | Oh, I don't know, maybe four or five feet in places.  |
| <b>Sledding and Construction in Dominion Gardens</b>    |   |
| B.M.:   | That's very interesting. Anything else about that...we didn't talk too much about that neighborhood, Florence Drive.  |
| Len Collins:  | It was a cul-de-sac...oh, Florence Drive. Not really. Well, yeah. Florence Drive is a steep hill, and when it snowed, that was always Sledding Central there, you know, and there wasn't anything at the end other than the other creek and the woods and that, so you could just go zooming down the street. Yeah. That was fun. |
| B.M.:   | Sounds like a lot of fun. You had the old wooden sleds at that time?  |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah. An old American Flyer. American Flyer.  |

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| B.M.:  | Let's see, anything else about that neighborhood, Dominion Gardens, that you recall?   |
| Len Collins:   | I remember they were building another row of apartments behind us on what's now Milan Drive I think. And I remember I could see it out of my bedroom window. And you watched all the workmen carrying the bricks up the ladders, and all that. That was always interesting.  |
| B.M.:  | This was when you lived on Florence Drive, right?  |
| Len Collins:   | Yeah.  |
| <b>Barrett School and an Enduring History Lesson</b> |  |
| B.M.:  | And the schools there, George Mason and Charles Barrett—anything in particular you remember about those buildings, or your teachers, or...   |
| Len Collins:   | I remember Barrett more. They had built a new school, which has subsequently been added on to, but at that time they were also using the original Barrett school, which was the old cardboard World War II temporary buildings, and I didn't go to school in the old building but I remember one thing. There was a real nice day, I can't remember when in the year it was, but the teacher said, "Since it's such a nice day, why don't we have class outside?" Of course everyone went "Right on!" So, it was a history class, I think. I remember the teacher saying "Every day, there is something going on somewhere in the world that will be historical." And the reason I remember that was that was the day the Puerto Ricans tried to assassinate Harry Truman. |
| B.M.:  | Wow.   |
| Len Collins:   | Yeah. So...  |
| B.M.:  | Wow.   |
| Len Collins:   | I remember that.   |
| B.M.:  | That was a very interesting lesson to add to that.   |
| Len Collins:   | Yeah. It really was.   |
| B.M.:  | How was the impact of that on your school or your...do you remember the assassination attempt, or...   |
| Len Collins:   | I don't really remember any of that. It was just the idea that someone had tried to kill the President.  |
| B.M.:  | Yeah.  |
| Len Collins:   | And especially Truman, because he would get out, walk around the city, and he didn't have this whole flotilla of SUVs chasing after him or anything, so it was kind of shocking, I guess, to a kid my age.   |
| B.M.:  | How old were you then?   |
| Len Collins:   | Oh, probably eight or nine. Yeah, so I remember that.  |
| <b>More Memories of Late 1940s in Alexandria</b>     |  |
| Len Collins:   | And I remember, too, there was a hill behind our apartment in Parkfairfax and that was also a good sledding area.  |
| B.M.:  | Your schools, they were segregated at this time, right?  |
| Len Collins:   | Yes.   |
| B.M.:  | And I guess by now you're probably getting to the age where you have some clubs or sports or something? Do you remember any of those?  |
| Len Collins:   | I was primarily...Well, in elementary school at Barrett I played on the 120-   |

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|  | pound football team. Six-man football.   |
| B.M.:                                      | Regular tackle football?   |
| Len Collins:                               | Yeah. I remember doing that. And we played down where the YMCA is down in Del Ray, there are still athletic fields there, and that's where we played our games, down there.                                  |
| B.M.:                                      | Did you have equipment you had to wear, pads and all?  |
| Len Collins:                               | Yeah, we had helmets and shoulder pads and that.   |
| B.M.:                                      | And then, you went at that point, to, after that, you went to ParkFairfax?   |
| Len Collins:                               | Yes.   |
| B.M.:                                      | And that's where you remained until you went off to school?  |
| Len Collins:                               | I remained in ParkFairfax—well, when we moved to ParkFairfax, I was still in Barrett school. And from there I went to the old Jefferson Junior High School. And ... <i>[Tape 1: Side B begins]</i>           |
| <b>Thomas Jefferson Junior High School</b> |  |
| B.M.:                                      | So you were at Barrett School and then you went to the old Thomas Jefferson, and where—that was a junior high.   |
| Len Collins:                               | That was a junior high school. It was...   |
| B.M.:                                      | And where was that located?  |
| Len Collins:                               | It was on Cameron and, what's the next over? Cameron ...   |
| B.M.:                                      | Cameron Mills? This is Cameron Mills...  |
| Len Collins:                               | And West. No, Cameron Street and West Street. Where the...oh, it isn't Lyles Crouch, it's ...  |
| B.M.:                                      | Oh, is that where Jefferson Houston is today?  |
| Len Collins:                               | Yeah, where Jefferson Houston is today.  |
| B.M.:                                      | That was a junior high.  |
| Len Collins:                               | That was a junior high, and it was the old 1921 Alexandria High School.  |
| B.M.:                                      | So this one you must have taken a bus to the school.   |
| Len Collins:                               | Yeah. We took a public bus, the old AB&W transit system, and we'd catch the bus up on Cameron Mills Road. And I'd walk from my house up to Cameron Mills Road, and then the bus dropped us off at Jefferson. |
| B.M.:                                      | And this bus—do you remember how much this cost to ride the bus?   |
| Len Collins:                               | I remember as a student there was a student card you could flash. Probably a dime or something, I don't know.  |
| B.M.:                                      | But you didn't have to pay, because you had the card?  |
| Len Collins:                               | Well, I think we paid something, but we'd show a card that said we were students and, you know, you'd get a discount.  |
| B.M.:                                      | Oh, you'd get a discount. Do you remember the route that the bus took?   |
| Len Collins:                               | Yeah. Down Cameron Mills. Down...not Old Dominion...down Cameron Mills to Russell Road to West Street. It dropped us off at West and Cameron.  |
| B.M.:                                      | So you would be coming through, now what --the area that's now part of Old Town or closer up to ...  |
| Len Collins:                               | Yeah, the non-[inaudible].   |
| B.M.:                                      | Were there, do you remember any things along the way that you saw along the way while you were driving [sic], any particular stores or any sights you saw while you were on the way to ...                   |

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| Len Collins:   | Not really. It basically looks the same now as it did then, although that corner there where Jefferson Houston is has definitely changed. That's where the old school was.  |
| B.M.:  | Coming down through the top of King Street and coming down on King and West, was that, were there shops and businesses there as there are now?  |
| Len Collins:   | Yeah.   |
| B.M.:  | And you probably saw more traffic over there? Similar to now?   |
| Len Collins:   | Yeah. It wasn't all that meaningful to me at that time.   |
| B.M.:  | It was just your way to school.<br>What about that school itself? Do you have memories from going there?  |
| Len Collins:   | Oh--that was an interesting experience for us. You know, I was from the lily-white section of Alexandria--up in ParkFairfax which was, you know, ParkFairfax and Beverly Hills were the, if you will, "nice" parts of town, and that was a real cultural shock to us going down to Jefferson Junior High, because that was our first exposure to the kids who lived in the rest of Alexandria, and that was a rather intimidating crowd. So that was interesting. |
| B.M.:  | In what ways? Can you give examples of how you felt intimidated, or...?   |
| Len Collins:   | Oh, yeah. We did, a lot of us did, and...   |
| B.M.:  | Was that because people were, well, can you explain, like the base of this? The core? Different--like blue collar vs. white collar, or what are we talking about?   |
| Len Collins:   | Well it was our first exposure to protection rackets.   |
| B.M.:  | Oh, my goodness.  |
| Len Collins:   | Oh, yeah, it was, yeah.   |
| B.M.:  | Whoa! So we're talking about gangs and things like that.  |
| Len Collins:   | Yes. Gang activity and that. And it was also our first experience changing classes. So yeah, that was different.  |
| B.M.:  | You had to learn to defend yourselves.  |
| Len Collins:   | Yeah. It was a real awakening to go there--which was probably good, because from there we went on to high school, so...   |
| B.M.:  | So how old were you, approximately? Well, I guess I should ask how many grades Thomas Jefferson had. Seventh?   |
| Len Collins:   | Jefferson was eighth grade.   |
| B.M.:  | Eighth grade only?  |
| Len Collins:   | Yeah, eighth grade only.  |
| <b>George Washington High School and Rifle Range</b> |   |
| Len Collins:   | And then we went to GW High School, which at the time was the only white high school in Alexandria. So we went to GW, and we're in real high school now.  |
| B.M.:  | At that point, did they have 9, 10, 11, did they have 12 then?  |
| Len Collins:   | Yeah.   |
| B.M.:  | They did have 12. So you went 9, 10, 11, 12 at that school, and that was the last one of that school. And how about GW, how was that different from, what do you remember about that school?  |
| Len Collins:   | It was a little...well I remember after Jefferson, it seemed to be a lot easier.  |

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|  | There were more activities like clubs and that, and I was in the Cadet Corps then, which I enjoyed.  |
| B.M.:  | That was a big thing at that school, wasn't it?  |
| Len Collins:                                     | Yeah, it was. And I remember they had a rifle range downstairs in the basement of George Washington High School. And that was the first time I'd ever fired a rifle. So that was interesting. (laughter) Yeah, so...   |
| B.M.:  | You went down there and you actually learned how to shoot?   |
| Len Collins:                                     | Yeah. They had a shooting range down there, and targets and all of that. We were shooting .22. Yeah, .22 rifles. Yeah. A lot of fun. (laughing)  |
| B.M.:  | What else about high school? Do you remember any of your classes, or social activities that you liked to do at that time?  |
| <b>A Walk through Old Town in the 1950s</b>      |  |
| Len Collins:                                     | Well, again, in GW, I was part of the crew team, the JV team, and that was down in—well, we'd practice down at the Old Dominion Boat Club, which is still at the base of King Street, much to the horror of the City Council, I think (laughter), and so we would get from GW after school and we would walk down to the Boat Club, and the route—you were going through The Berg, going past Parker-Gray High School, and we were down in the old section of Alexandria, which was not anything like it is now, and I remember walking down King Street many an evening, all the way down King Street, not realizing at all where City Hall was, because they had a row of shops along King Street where the plaza is now, so City Hall was just kind of back there someplace. But you couldn't see it unless you knew where it was. Well, I didn't know where it was, so, and when you get down to King and what is it, Union, that was all warehouses, and they were, a lot of them were empty, and there were a lot of empty stores down there and that. So it was a pretty grim part of town. And so... |
| B.M.:  | We're talking about the 50s?   |
| Len Collins:                                     | Yeah, this would be '54, say.  |
| B.M.:  | Were there rough characters hanging around, or people you had to be...   |
| Len Collins:                                     | Yeah.  |
| B.M.:  | You had to be afraid of...what? Getting robbed or something?   |
| Len Collins:                                     | You had to watch out where you were going.   |
| <b>Race Relations in Alexandria in the 1950s</b> |  |
| B.M.:  | What were the race relations like at that time? ...did you have any dealings with people of other races at all?  |
| Len Collins:                                     | Not really.  |
| B.M.:  | Not really, everybody just stayed separate?  |
| Len Collins:                                     | We stayed on our side of the street, if you will, and the black students stayed on the other side. So there wasn't a whole lot of intermingling at all.  |
| B.M.:  | At all, and not even in a worrisome way, that you had to be worried if you walked through a neighborhood or something like that?   |
| Len Collins:                                     | Well, there may have been a few catcalls but other than that, there wasn't anything. It was just the idea of we were...we always traveled in groups down there. ...  |
| B.M.:  | And it wasn't the other way either, that the black people had to worry about,  |

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|   | there weren't incidents like that that you remember either? It was just pretty much everybody...  |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah. Everybody just stayed away from each other, so...   |
| B.M.:   | Were there, how about the stores and everything. Everybody shopped at the stores, that you recall?  |
| Len Collins:  | I think so, yeah.   |
| B.M.:   | The buses? Black people sat on the back at that time?   |
| Len Collins:  | I think blacks were still in the rear of the bus.   |
| B.M.:   | At the back of the bus.   |
| Len Collins:  | I was...my dentist is Al Bell up here on Duke Street, he's black and a little younger than I am, and he and I compare stories a lot about growing up in Alexandria.   |
| B.M.:   | He grew up here as well?  |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah, he grew up in The Berg, I think. Super guy.   |
| B.M.:   | He'd be a good candidate for an interview!  |
| Len Collins:  | He would be!  |
| B.M.:   | Before I go, I'll have to get his info.   |
| Len Collins:  | Good guy. Yeah, He's interesting. Yeah, he has a lot of memories of the area, I think. So, yeah.  |
| <b>Switching to Francis Hammond High School</b>     |   |
| B.M.:   | Anything else about those schools that you want to comment on, or your social life? Were you dating then? At that age, did you date, or was that considered OK for people to date at that age at that time?   |
| Len Collins:  | At that time, probably I was just starting to. I didn't have my driver's license; that was certainly a hindrance. Then I went to GW for two years, and then they were building the new Francis Hammond High School up off Seminary Road, so we all transferred up to Hammond. |
| B.M.:   | So you went to Hammond then.  |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah.   |
| B.M.:   | Is that where the Hammond Junior High is now?   |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah. Same building. And so we all transferred up there, and we transferred in as juniors, so we had two senior years, which was great.   |
| B.M.:   | Two senior years?   |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah. We were juniors, and we were the senior class at the time. Then we were seniors...  |
| B.M.:   | Oh, I got it, you were at the top. That's a big thing in high school!   |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah. So that was interesting.  |
| B.M.:   | How did you...so, I'm trying to picture how you got to school now, because right now, that's not a great place to cross Seminary Road to get to school.   |
| Len Collins:  | No. At that time, Seminary Road was a sleepy little two-lane road. And...   |
| B.M.:   | Did you walk to school there?   |
| Len Collins:  | Well, there was a bus that took us, a city bus, or an AB&W bus, I forget, but mostly I had friends with cars so I could get a ride with them back and forth to school.  |
| <b>Social Life for a Teenager in the Late 1950s</b> |   |

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| B.M.:               | Do you remember social activities you did with your friends at that time?   |
| Len Collins:        | Yeah, it was mostly parties and dances at houses, and dates going to the movies, the old, what was it, Mount Vernon Theatre down where Ernie's Crab House is now, and it was mostly that type of thing. And I was active at that time in Boy Scouts, and we had a very active troop. Did a lot of camping weekends and that type of stuff. And...   |
| B.M.:               | And helped during floods...   |
| Len Collins:        | Yeah.   |
| B.M.:               | Were you an Eagle? Did you become an Eagle?   |
| Len Collins:        | Almost. I was a Life Scout. I was never able to pass the swimming test and you had to do that to be an Eagle.   |
| B.M.:               | After all that falling in the water! (laughing)   |
| Len Collins:        | (laughing) I know! So I made it up to Life Scout and that was the end of it. And you know, I was doing a lot of dating at that time.  |
| B.M.:               | —dating—did people usually go out as couples, like double dates?  |
| Len Collins:        | Yes. Yeah.  |
| B.M.:               | Typically you went out as a group and did things. And what were some of the things you liked to do?   |
| Len Collins:        | Well, let's see. Movies were real popular. I know some of the churches had socials that we'd go to. There was the old Alexandria Roller Skating Rink, which was down where, the Crowne Plaza is down there now, I think.  |
| B.M.:               | They had the organ, that organ music...   |
| Len Collins:        | Yeah. And then it became a R&B venue. So you could go down there. Remember at that time, though, Alexandria was dry. And even though we weren't supposed to drink, there just wasn't a whole lot of social activity on the restaurant scene in Alexandria. So there wasn't a whole lot of impetus in going downtown. And I could probably go half a year without going down to Old Town Alexandria. I mean, you just didn't go down to Old Town Alexandria. |
| B.M.:               | There reason for you to go –that wasn't any big deal.   |
| Len Collins:        | I remember a lot of the activity revolved around meeting your friends over at the old Shirlington Hot Shoppes. The Shirlington circle, there was a Hot Shoppes right in the middle of it and, yeah, you'd meet up there after a football or basketball game. So that was about it. Another place was Top's Drive-in on Glebe Road in Arlington.   |
| B.M.:               | Sounds like a lot of fun. You didn't have, at that time, there was no big problems like we have with drugs or things like that today in the schools, and weapons and things, that was just not part of the picture then?  |
| Len Collins:        | No. I remember some people smoked, but...   |
| B.M.:               | That was the big problem....  |
| <b>Leaving Home</b> |   |
| B.M.:               | I wanted to talk with you, you left home in 1959... went to the Virginia...   |
| Len Collins:        | '58. August of '58. Went to Lexington, Virginia, VMI.   |
| B.M.:               | What prompted that choice? Do you think maybe your time in the Cadet Corps was influential with that, or have anything to do with it?   |
| Len Collins:        | (laughing) It was influential, yeah. I think, well I know one of my early   |



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|                                       | Scoutmasters was a VMI graduate, and I really liked this man a lot. He was a great Scoutmaster and just an all-around nice guy, and then when I was in Hammond, I remember I got to know the librarian fairly well, and she mentioned that her brother was a VMI graduate and had taught Spanish down at VMI. And I don't have a natural bent for foreign languages, so it turned out I arranged to have, can't remember his name, Colonel...Ford, I think, but anyway, he had a house down in Old Town, one of the old historic houses, and I remember I would go down there once a week and he would try to tutor me in Spanish, and I remember he wrote a very nice letter to VMI on my behalf, and anyway, I ended up going there (laughing).  |
| B.M.:                                 | What were you planning to do after graduation, or did you have plans at that time?   |
| Len Collins:                          | Well, I thought I'd go in the military for a career.   |
| B.M.:                                 | It sounds like you were pretty excited about this, going off to VMI.   |
| Len Collins:                          | Yeah.  |
| B.M.:                                 | Did you feel about leaving home like it was a great adventure, or were you nervous?  |
| Len Collins:                          | I was apprehensive. But that passed. So you know, it was an enjoy—interesting experience, let me put it that way. I learned a lot. Learned a lot about myself, learned a lot about time management, and getting along, and depending on yourself, and how to make decisions, and facing up to consequences if you make a wrong decision. So it was an experience.  |
| <b>Returning to Northern Virginia</b> |  |
| B.M.:                                 | You returned to Alexandria in 1968. What prompted that return?   |
| Len Collins:                          | Well, I went on active duty and went to Europe. France and Germany. I was there when Charlie DeGaulle kicked the Americans out of France, and then I decided the...I was in Germany by then, and I was a nuclear weapons officer. And I decided that wasn't anything to really build a career on, and I tried to branch transfer out of the Ordnance Corps into something else, but the Ordnance Corps wouldn't release me for some reason. So I decided to retire, or separate, leave active duty. And after I had made that decision, there was a colonel who had come over to Germany on travel to look at our organization, and he had come from the headquarters of the whole nuclear operation, out of the Joliet Ammunition and Supply Agency out in Joliet, Illinois. And I talked to him, you know, and said "Hey, I'm getting out," and he says, "Hmmm...I can use someone like you. You interested in government?" And I said "I guess," you know, I had a job. So, he hired me, direct hire, and so I came out of the government, took 30 days leave and reported out to Joliet. And I was out there for maybe a week and decided "Nah, this isn't for me." And so it took maybe another year to engineer a job back at the old Army Materiel Command, which at that time was located over at National Airport at Graveling Point, so—the old cardboard building along the parkway, where the airport rental car lot is now. So I came back, and you know, got an apartment here and went to work over there, and by that time I'd met my wife, and so we... |
| B.M.:                                 | She was from this area as well?  |

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| Len Collins:                 | Well, she was living down at Hunting Towers, and her boss was a friend of my parents, and he didn't approve of the man she was dating, so anyway, they engineered a party and we met and so we started dating and one thing leads to another.   |
| B.M.:                        | So parents know best in this case.  |
| Len Collins:                 | Yeah. So we were married down at Saint Mary's, and we had our reception at George Washington's old club, which is now a condominium. So, and then we went back to Germany and we had a really enjoyable three years in Germany. Our daughter was born in Germany. And then we came back here, or came back to old Springfield.  |
| B.M.:                        | Virginia.   |
| Len Collins:                 | Yeah. So I was back again with the Army Materiel Command. And at that time they had moved from the airport out to Eisenhower Avenue. That's at that big high rise that they're trying to rent.  |
| B.M.:                        | OK. That's where they were.   |
| Len Collins:                 | Still. Yeah, so...  |
| B.M.:                        | So what was drawing you back was jobs, and probably family as well?   |
| Len Collins:                 | Yeah, jobs. And I liked the area.   |
| B.M.:                        | You liked it.   |
| Len Collins:                 | And my parents were here, you know, and I knew a fair amount of people here from school and growing up. I was familiar with the area. And, you know, an attractive job...   |
| B.M.:                        | Are there still people here that you know from back in school, or from neighborhoods?   |
| Len Collins:                 | Yeah. A few, yeah.  |
| <b>Parkfairfax Neighbors</b> |   |
| B.M.:                        | I didn't ask you much about ParkFairfax. Let me just segue back for a second and see if there's something you'd like to say about living there, any influence or memories about that?   |
| Len Collins:                 | Yeah. Well, that's where most of my classmates lived. And I remember it was very heavily government. And military, but mostly government. And I remember one of my close friends was a kid named Sandy Short. His father was the Press Secretary for Harry Truman, and when Mr. Short died unexpectedly, I remember Truman came to the wedding [sic] which was down at the old Community Church down on Cameron Mills Road and Glebe Road down there. And who else? Dean Rusk, who was... |
| B.M.:                        | ...lived during the time you lived there?   |
| Len Collins:                 | Yeah.   |
| B.M.:                        | But neither of Presidents Nixon or Ford...lived there during the time you lived there?  |
| Len Collins:                 | Nixon at one time had lived on Greenway Place but he was gone by then. But we had a Congressman downstairs. I remember I had talked to him about getting an appointment as a Capitol page, and it was going to happen! Unfortunately, there was an election that he lost, so...   |
| B.M.:                        | That was the end of that!   |
| Len Collins:                 | Yeah. That was the end of that idea. (laughter)   |

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| B.M.:   | Do you remember the Congressman's name?  |
| Len Collins:  | He was from New Jersey, I think. No, I don't remember the name. I remember our next door neighbor was a man named Arnie Swamula, and he had probably the best title in government. He was Vice Director of Wildlife at the Fish and Wildlife Service. And I always thought that was a magnificent title! (laughter)  |
| B.M.:   | Not like the wildlife were going to listen to him or anything...(laughing)   |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah. But I remember...his family was from Seattle. And his brothers were commercial fisherman. And I remember about twice a year, they would ship him a whole salmon packed in ice, and leave it on the porch. And he'd go out and he'd butcher it. And we'd always end up with a few salmon steaks, and so that was always fun.  |
| B.M.:   | There's some photos here. Do these have anything to do with this interview?  |
| Len Collins:  | No, that's my granddaughter.   |
| B.M.:   | OK, just checking. I didn't want to leave them out if they were.   |
| <b>Volunteer Work for Office of Historic Alexandria</b>             |  |
| B.M.:   | I want to switch up to ...I understand that you do some volunteering for Oral, not Oral History, the Office of Historic Alexandria?  |
| Len Collins:  | Yes, I'm a docent up at Fort Ward.   |
| B.M.:   | At the museum itself.  |
| Len Collins:  | Yeah. And I operate the gift shop, and I give the tours, and that type of stuff. I've been doing it now, I don't know, eight years, how long have I been retired, eight years, I guess.  |
| B.M.:   | What drew you to that?   |
| Len Collins:  | Well I've always enjoyed history and [Tape 2: Side A begins]...I liked the Alexandria emphasis on the Civil War, since we were...  |
| <b>Volunteer Work for Office of Historic Alexandria (continued)</b> |  |
| B.M.:   | So we were talking about the Office of Historic Alexandria, your work at Fort Ward, and what brought you into that.  |
| Len Collins:  | Well, I've always enjoyed military history. Alexandria figured prominently in the Civil War, and especially this area right here. And I remember as a kid when we were living in ParkFairfax, one of newspapers did an article on the forts of Virginia, and I remember tromping around out in what's now Fort Ward and seeing if we could find the remnants of the old fort. I don't think we were successful but anyway, you know, it just seemed like an enjoyable idea. And I've enjoyed it, my time up there.             |
| B.M.:   | So has that changed, Fort Ward itself has changed, since when you, you remember it from when you were a child?   |
| Len Collins:  | Oh, yeah. In...what was it, 1960-?. On the Centennial of the Civil War, in 1961 or 1962, the City reconstructed the fort. And originally, what is now the museum was going to be a visitor's center, and then the City acquired a large collection of Civil War artifacts and they turned the visitor's center into a museum. So, you know, it's—we get a fair amount of visitors up there. And it's the only authentically restored fort of the, what was it, 68 forts that surrounded Washington during the Civil War, so... |
| B.M.:   | You did go up there when you were a child?   |

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| Len Collins: | Yes.  |
| B.M.:        | What was it like at that time?  |
| Len Collins: | It was just woods. Fairly dense woods. Overgrown and that. There was a black community up there at that time, which the City, when they took over the land to reconstruct the fort and to build the park up there, the residents of that community were displaced, and...   |
| B.M.:        | You don't remember the name of the community, by any chance? The neighborhood was called "The Fort."  |
| Len Collins: | ...no. No. I know it's quite a prominent issue now, because the relatives of the residents of that community mostly attend the black church at the corner of King Street and, right beside Lindsay Lexus, and they brought the issue to the forefront with the City Council. And the City is now working with archaeologists. And the idea is that they're going to try and recreate the footprint of the community, and then there will be a section set aside in the Fort Ward Museum to commemorate the community. And they're still working on that exhibit now.  |
| B.M.:        | They moved in after the Civil War, that group?  |
| Len Collins: | Yeah. During the war, Alexandria was basically separated from Fairfax County by a stockade fence that ran something like 17 miles around the railroad yard that was here. And the black citizens were called contraband at the time. They weren't about to go outside the stockade, or actually, anybody inside Alexandria wasn't about to go outside the stockade, because the Confederates had raiders riding all through this area. You know, Mosby's Raiders and Quantrill and all of those. So after the war, when the land outside of the City became free, or actually freer I guess, the contraband moved out in that area to do farming, and a lot of them worked at the Seminary. And that's how the community got started. And I think the name...I've read the name. I think the name had some connection with the Seminary. Like Seminaryville, or something like that. But that was the start of it. And the community was out there until the mid-1960s I guess, mid- or late 60s. And from the photos I've seen, there were some fairly substantial houses out there. |
| B.M.:        | So the issue is that the houses were taken, or the issue is that the families...we're getting a little far afield, but this is very interesting.  |
| Len Collins: | The issue as I understand is that the City just moved in and moved the residents out. That was one thing. And then there was a cemetery. Or there is a cemetery out there. And the City just basically ignored the cemetery, and Alexandria Department of Public Works, they chartered a greenhouse up there, and some of the members of Oak—that's what it is, Oakwood Baptist Church, happened to be out there and saw maintenance trucks and that parked in the cemetery, and you know, parked over graves and stuff like that. So they raised all sorts of hell downtown, rightly so, and you know, the City decided oops, we've got a problem on our hands, so they're trying to make it right.  |
| B.M.:        | Very interesting.   |
| Len Collins: | Yeah.   |

| <b>Closing Thoughts</b> |  |
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| B.M.:                   | So we're going to wrap up. Is there anything you think people should know about Alexandria, let's say new people who want to move in here, and then...   |
| Len Collins:            | It's, to me it's like a small town. Because, you know, living here, we're only, what, two blocks away from King Street. So we can walk to Metro, we can walk to Whole Foods or Balducci's or Safeway. We know our dry cleaner, we've had him over to dinner, and you know, there's talent all up and down King Street and all these side areas. Like there's an antique shop down on Henry Street, and the proprietor there is a retired Army Sergeant-Major who was out at Fort Belvoir, and he's running the antique shop, and he does a marvelous job restoring furniture, if you ever need furniture restored. He did that dining room table out there. The top was in pretty bad shape, and he restored the whole thing at a very attractive price. So, I guess—there's a lot of talent around here. A lot of interesting people. Very--so it has the feel to me of a small town. You know, you can walk everywhere, and after a while you get to know all the people out there, and, so...I love it. |
| B.M.:                   | I'll just ask if there's anything else that I haven't asked you, something that you think is important that you might want to add.   |
| Len Collins:            | No, I can't think of anything. (laughing)  |
| B.M.:                   | With that I will end and turn off the tape, and I want to thank you very much.   |
| Len Collins:            | No problem.  |
| B.M.:                   | It's been quite fascinating. <i>[End]</i>  |