



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



Project Name: *Alexandria Legacies*

Title: *Interview with Elsie Thomas*

Date of Interview: *December 15, 2006*

Location of Interview: *Mrs. Thomas' home in Alexandria, Virginia*

Interviewer: *Donise Stevens*

Transcriber: *Donise Stevens*

Abstract: Elsie Virginia Tucker Thomas was born in Alexandria in 1919. She went to school at Parker-Gray in Alexandria and graduated Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. She also went to Virginia State and Howard University. She was the second President of Hopkins House in Alexandria, established in 1939, and served from 1954 to 1965. She talks about the music at Zion Baptist Church as well as the parade sponsored by the Odd Fellows. This is the second interview of Mrs. Thomas; the first was conducted in April 2002.

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Elsie Thomas, 2006

Introductions	
Donise Stevens:	I want you to say your name and your birth date.
Elsie Thomas:	My name is Elsie Virginia Thomas. My birthday is December 5. I was born in 1919.
D.S.:	Thank you. Your birthplace Mrs. Thomas?
Elsie Thomas:	Alexandria, Virginia, 916 Queen Street.
D.S.:	What were your parent's names?
Elsie Thomas:	Samuel K. Tucker, and Annie Williams Tucker.
D.S.:	Thank you, and how about your sisters' and brothers' names?
Elsie Thomas:	George David Tucker, Samuel Wilbert Tucker.
D.S.:	Wilbert?
Elsie Thomas:	Yes.
D.S.:	W-I-L-B-E-R-T?
Elsie Thomas:	Yes. Otto Lee Tucker.
D.S.:	Okay. And you are?
Elsie Thomas:	Elsie Virginia Tucker Thomas.
D.S.:	And you were the baby?
Elsie Thomas:	I was the baby of the family.
D.S.:	That's so sweet. Tell me about your education.

Education in Alexandria and Washington, D.C.	
Elsie Thomas:	I attended...for a time, Parker-Gray School.
D.S.:	Do you remember around what year that was?
Elsie Thomas:	When I was 6 years old, I know.
D.S.:	Wow, do the math...be about 1925.
Elsie Thomas:	I was born in 1919.
D.S.:	Right, so I added 6. So keep...
Elsie Thomas:	I went about the time I was supposed to go...
D.S.:	Right...
Elsie Thomas:	'Cause my mom was a schoolteacher too.
D.S.:	Your mother taught at...
Elsie Thomas:	She never taught here, she taught in Fauquier County [unintelligible].
D.S.:	Your mother was from Fauquier County?
Elsie Thomas:	Yes, a place called Midland, Virginia.
D.S.:	M-I-D-L-A-N-D?
Elsie Thomas:	Uh huh.
D.S.:	So she taught there, but you went to school here in Alexandria.
Elsie Thomas:	I [unintelligible] went to school here...in Alexandria.
D.S.:	Right.
Elsie Thomas:	And I think I went to Parker-Gray all the time. Until I got to...maybe the eight or ninth grade and then I went to Dunbar High School.
D.S.:	Right.
Elsie Thomas:	In Washington, D.C.
D.S.:	Do you remember why people had to go to D.C.?
Elsie Thomas:	We had no high school...black.
D.S.:	Only white in Alexandria.
Elsie Thomas:	At that time we only went so far, I think we went to the ninth grade.
D.S.:	Then you're bussed to D.C.?
Elsie Thomas:	Then I went to D.C.
D.S.:	You want me to stop it?
Elsie Thomas:	I won't let this so just [unintelligible].
D.S.:	So, how did you remember that experience, of going to Washington, was it exciting? Was it confusing?
Elsie Thomas:	No, because it was very, I was used to it, because I had relatives living in Washington.
D.S.:	Oh.
Elsie Thomas:	And I often went to Washington.
D.S.:	You remember much about Washington and coming back to Virginia, the differences in the way you were treated? As a young girl?
Elsie Thomas:	Did I remember the difference in the trip?
D.S.:	Yes, was there...was there a difference in the treatment you received and things you could do in Washington as compared to Alexandria?

Virginia State College and Howard University	
Elsie Thomas:	I never paid any attention to it...at all. Just mostly was glad I could go to school, because there was no ninth grade in Alexandria. And I'm glad that they allowed me to come to school in Washington, and I stayed there all the way through high school. And in...after high school, I went to the school my mother went to, which was Virginia State College. And I stayed in Virginia State College until I graduated later. After graduation I went to Howard University school of...Social Work.
D.S.:	What do you remember of being a young woman in college back in those days? Where there very many people in your peer group, that you knew or did you have time for social activity, do you remember any social things that went on during college days?
Elsie Thomas:	My brothers had gone to Howard before I did, so therefore many times I was at Howard, as a young child, because they would take me to see where they went to school. So Howard was not a strange place for me, 'cause I'd also gone to Dunbar...'cause my high school was at Dunbar.
D.S.:	So when you brought your expertise and knowledge back to Alexandria to use it...
Elsie Thomas:	But I was not allowed to teach in Alexandria.
D.S.:	Because?
Elsie Thomas:	I guess...I don't know really, but I always said because I had what I had and I guess just they just didn't want me to be here.
D.S.:	Where there other black teachers?
Elsie Thomas:	They had other black teachers, sure.
D.S.:	But you had more education?
Elsie Thomas:	I probably did...
D.S.:	You were...
Elsie Thomas:	Yeah, 'cause I'd been to Virginia State and I'd been to Howard University and I think I went to West Virginia State for while.
D.S.:	So you basically had more education than the principal probably, is that what you're thinking?
Elsie Thomas:	Yeah because, my husband, when I went to West Virginia State, my husband...and I don't know if I was in college or was working there, 'cause I know it was at this point that I had had all this education, so while he was at, I can't even remember the places now. I just have to call Yvonne Bennet because she's from there. And, that's where we met.
Marriage	
D.S.:	So, I missed asking about your spouse, what was his name?
Elsie Thomas:	My...son?
D.S.:	Husband.
Elsie Thomas:	My husband? My husband, now I know I ought to know my husband,

	but lord, what happened to him?
D.S.:	His name is William like his son, right?
Elsie Thomas:	My husband was from...from Arkansas.
D.S.:	William Thomas.
Elsie Thomas:	William Thomas, thank you. William N. Thomas.
D.S.:	William N....from Arkansas. You met him at Virginia State...oh West Virginia State, now...
Elsie Thomas:	It met him at Zion Baptist Church.
D.S.:	Ah, here.
Elsie Thomas:	He was down in Fort Belvoir, as a soldier but came to came to Zion Baptist Church on Sundays. And that's where I met him.
D.S.:	Oh, and this was before he had even decided to become a minister or anything, he a soldier at Fort Belvoir?
Elsie Thomas:	At Fort Belvoir, during the second world war.
D.S.:	And when did you all become engaged and married?
Elsie Thomas:	I think he had left...I don't know [unintelligible].
D.S.:	Well how old were you?
Elsie Thomas:	Well, I was teaching, so we must have been...a year older than 19.
D.S.:	Right, in your twenties. That's nice. Well kind'a steering you back to Alexandria because that's because that's my primary focus. And I know you've had so much influence in the city.
Elsie Thomas:	I have?
Work at Hopkins House	
D.S.:	Tell me about your social work in Alexandria, how it started. What made you...want to utilize your talents here where maybe they weren't even ready for you yet?
Elsie Thomas:	I had done...some work at Hopkins House.
D.S.:	What is Hopkins House?
Elsie Thomas:	Mrs. Chissell and Mrs. Wright, Mrs. Wright knew me; she lived down on South Columbus Street, down there close to my church, and I had known her most of my life...
D.S.:	Can you help me with the spelling of her name? Is it "CH" or "G"?
Elsie Thomas:	"Ch". I know its "C-H" But I can't remember...
D.S.:	I just want to make sure, because when I listen to the tape I won't have you to ask that question when I'm trying to type it out...
Elsie Thomas:	Uh-huh.
D.S.:	It's probably C-H-I-S-S-E-L. [Chissell is correct]
Elsie Thomas:	It is...
D.S.:	Go on, don't let me interrupt you.
Elsie Thomas:	You know Dr. Chissell was her husband.
D.S.:	O.K. that will be easy to figure out. So go on.
Elsie Thomas:	What was I saying?

D.S.:	You were talking about when you first heard about Hopkins House. And if you can remember what Hopkins House was when you first got to it...
Elsie Thomas:	Well, Hopkins House was; my father was on the board at Hopkins House. So I knew it was a recreation center for everybody. At night the adults came, for meetings, you know, 'cause they're the one's that actually ran Hopkins House.
D.S.:	Right. Dr. and Mrs. Chissell were a part of that.
Elsie Thomas:	And the children came in the day, and the only ones that probably came in the evening were older children.
D.S.:	So it was an after-school program, and family counseling, meeting place.
Elsie Thomas:	Uh-huh.
D.S.:	And a haven for the neighborhood.
Elsie Thomas:	Yeah.
D.S.:	And you started working for them in what capacity? Do you remember what your first title there was? Or what you were doing?
Elsie Thomas:	I really don't think I had a title, I was a student then. And Mrs. Wright and Mrs. Chissell ask me to come, because I had already finished college and everything, so they asked me to come and work with them.
D.S.:	Great.
Elsie Thomas:	But there was no title involved.
D.S.:	There was no title involved; they just knew they had a good thing and they wanted help.
Elsie Thomas:	Yes, I guess.
D.S.:	So what did you do for the Hopkins House?
Elsie Thomas:	Everything I possibly could. I had classes of the young [unintelligible] students. Gosh it's been so long ago. That's a awful thing to ask me! [laughter] But I was having students, seeing who they were, what category and then there's even teaching and the things that I had already gone though. In Virginia State, 'cause it seems like I worked down there a little while, in Richmond. It might have been Richmond. [unintelligible] Richmond, Virginia State, Newport News.
D.S.:	Right.
Elsie Thomas:	I know, those were three places that I did some kind of work and each one was because my brother was in Richmond as a lawyer, although he lived in Greenville County. But I can't think of what the place is.
D.S.:	That's okay.
Elsie Thomas:	And then Newport News is where his wife's home was. [unintelligible] And Celestine Nelson lived there for as while.
D.S.:	So you brought the expertise you gained from working with him back to Virginia, and you were working in the Hopkins House?

Elsie Thomas:	Yeah. As a matter of fact, I was, at one time the director of Hopkins House.
D.S.:	Okay. That's the title I was after!
Elsie Thomas:	Right after Mrs. Chissell, uh huh.
D.S.:	You were the director of Hopkins House and you were in charge of everything, and it flourished while you were there and we want to thank you for that and acknowledge it.
Elsie Thomas:	Thank you.
D.S.:	I'm glad you remember it. So tell me...
Elsie Thomas:	'Cause I was there Mrs.—she lived on the corner of Gibbon and the same place Odd Fellows Hall is on—Columbus Street, is that Columbus Street?
D.S.:	I think so.
Elsie Thomas:	Yeah. It was on Columbus Street, right on the corner. Her name was Ruth Wright.
D.S.:	Okay. And she was one of the ones you worked with at the Hopkins House?
Elsie Thomas:	Yeah, she was next to Mrs. Chissell.
D.S.:	Right. Do you remember the place you just mentioned, was it a social club?
Elsie Thomas:	What did I mention? Odd Fellows Hall?
D.S.:	That's a lodge, isn't it?
Elsie Thomas:	Yes.
D.S.:	Were you a member of any lodge?
Elsie Thomas:	Yes, but it was juvenile.
D.S.:	That's the name of it, or when you were young?
Elsie Thomas:	When I was a juvenile.
D.S.:	Tell me about that.
Elsie Thomas:	I couldn't tell you a word about it! 'Cause it's been so long ago! I think it was somewhere out here, at one time, they had the children out in here, but I don't know where.
D.S.:	Right. Everything's changed so much.
Elsie Thomas:	Yeah. I have done so many things.
D.S.:	I know.
Elsie Thomas:	I can't remember.
D.S.:	Well there's a lot of things that you do remember, that's the things I want to tap into because the stories are delightful. It's just the matter of not feeling pressured about answers and letting your mind go ahead and wander and tell a story. If you think of something that you would like to share, just pop up and steer me that way. My focus is stuff that happened in Alexandria. When you start talking about the corner of this street and that street, it evokes people, it helps them pinpoint on an area, and the town was so different then. Those are the kinds of

	things people do want to hear.
Elsie Thomas:	You never heard of Ruth Wright? Ruth Wright?
D.S.:	No.
Elsie Thomas:	Well she was my [unintelligible].
D.S.:	She was your sister?
Elsie Thomas:	My assistant at Hopkins House. Mrs. Chissell, she was the first, whatever they called it [president], at the Hopkins House.
D.S.:	She was the wife of a doctor, right?
Elsie Thomas:	Yeah of Dr. Chissell.
D.S.:	Now were they black people?
Elsie Thomas:	Yeah. Both of them.
D.S.:	So he worked in Alexandria as a doctor? What kind of a doctor was he, just general practitioner?
Elsie Thomas:	No, he was a medical doctor.
D.S.:	Yeah, that's what I mean, regular medical doctor, like Dr. Lindo, and Dr. Carpenter, they just had practices and saw people in office.
Elsie Thomas:	No I think he went out too.
D.S.:	He did house calls?
Elsie Thomas:	He probably even had something to do with the hospital even, 'cause that seems to be the way he was.
D.S.:	Right, right...
Elsie Thomas:	But you know, when you're a kid, you don't remember all this.
D.S.:	I know!
Odd Fellows and the Women's Auxiliary	
Elsie Thomas:	Because Mrs. Chissell now was at Hopkins House, I met Ruth Wright [unintelligible] was in the women's part of the Odd Fellows.
D.S.:	The women's auxiliary of the Odd Fellows?
Elsie Thomas:	Yeah it was some women's group.
D.S.:	Right.
Elsie Thomas:	Yeah, 'cause my mother was too...she was captain of the drill team for the women.
D.S.:	Do you remember much about that?
Elsie Thomas:	Yeah I knew a lot, I mean I knew she was there.
D.S.:	Did she have to wear a costume, when she was drilling?
Elsie Thomas:	She wore...
D.S.:	Do you remember what it looked like?
Elsie Thomas:	I know it was black...it looked like a suit but it had a skirt instead...
DS.	Cool! Did they have a hat?
Elsie Thomas:	Uh-huh. They could take it off.
D.S.:	So that was part of the women's auxiliary? [unintelligible].
Elsie Thomas:	'Cause she was captain.
D.S.:	That's neat! And all the husbands were...

Elsie Thomas:	My father was another captain...Lord I had the man's name in my mind. Humph. That's funny 'cause I knew all of them...
D.S.:	Did they participate in any parade or anything?
Elsie Thomas:	Oh yeah they had their own parades.
D.S.:	They had their own parades in Alexandria?
Elsie Thomas:	Oh yeah.
D.S.:	Where?
Elsie Thomas:	They moved from...[unintelligible] close down by the [unintelligible].
D.S.:	Down by the Odd Fellows Hall?
Elsie Thomas:	Yeah.
D.S.:	And that was at Gibbon and Columbus?
Elsie Thomas:	No. it wasn't at Gibbon and Columbus...it was between Wolfe and whatever that street is as you are coming down from Alexandria, you know, I mean the city.
D.S.:	Right.
Elsie Thomas:	I think one was Wilkes Street and the other one was Wolfe.
D.S.:	Wilkes and Wolfe. I think I know, is it the same place that was used for the Departmental Club functions?
Elsie Thomas:	The Departmental Club was on Gibbon and Royal Street.
D.S.:	The parade; I'm fascinated because that means that there was a Black Parade!
Elsie Thomas:	Oh yeah.
D.S.:	I had never heard about it, Sweetie! Let me hear!
Elsie Thomas:	You didn't have to be black either!
D.S.:	You didn't have to be black, but the fact that we were parading was cool.
Elsie Thomas:	Uh-huh.
Music	
D.S.:	Do you remember the music? Who was the band? Was it the high schools too? Or just the Odd Fellows Lodge?
Elsie Thomas:	I can't tell 'cause my daddy was a musician.
D.S.:	He was? What did he play?
Elsie Thomas:	He's the [unintelligible] As a matter of fact he was the first person that I ever knew at Zion Baptist Church [gesticulates].
D.S.:	He conducted?
Elsie Thomas:	He was the conductor. He was also one of the deacons of Zion Baptist Church. And his father lived, which my crazy daughter sold, right up the block from Zion Baptist. A white lady lived there, and then next door was my grandfather's house. And I understand she went down there and sold it. It belonged to me.
D.S.:	That would be?
Elsie Thomas:	Samuel A. Tucker. That was my father.

D.S.:	He was a conductor for the band; did he play a musical instrument also?
Elsie Thomas:	Yes. I would imagine it was a clarinet.
D.S.:	Clarinet. Oh, that's lovely.
Elsie Thomas:	All my brothers did.
D.S.:	They did? They all played wind instruments?
Elsie Thomas:	That same band instrument...from piano on...
D.S.:	Well, of course you are renowned for playing piano in your day, right?
Elsie Thomas:	Uh-huh. Not now.
D.S.:	Not now. But you still have a piano, can you still play?
Elsie Thomas:	Oh yeah I can play some.
D.S.:	Perhaps you can grace me with a song for my tape recorder [laugh] that will be for my personal use.
Elsie Thomas:	[laughter] Okay.
D.S.:	I should put your children's names and addresses on this list, so can you tell me your children's names?
Elsie Thomas:	One is Yvette Thomas.
D.S.:	Deborah Yvette?
Elsie Thomas:	Deborah Thomas...Yvette was my niece.
D.S.:	Okay. You can't claim her, even though you might love her like a daughter! Deborah Thomas and William.
Elsie Thomas:	William Thomas.
D.S.:	Oh, I love the idea of a parade. That's the kind of thing that I find fascinating 'cause I can remember the city when it was different but not as far back as you can, because I wasn't born.
Elsie Thomas:	No you weren't.
D.S.:	So you give me all kinds of inspiration about my city. There aren't many of us natives around, you know?
Elsie Thomas:	I know.
White House Visits	
D.S.:	Well I would like for you to tell me the story you told me once about how you happened to hook up with the President, and travel with him to Hot Springs or Berkeley Springs? Does that ring any bells with you?
Elsie Thomas:	I remember being with the President.
D.S.:	How did that start?
Elsie Thomas:	I'm trying to think. This man was from Georgia. But it's been so long now, I can't remember his name. And I had a habit of catching the bus. Right in front of the White House. So he decided one day to invite me in and play with the kids in the yard. And from then on look like I was also a member of the White House.
D.S.:	Oh my goodness!

Elsie Thomas:	And all 'cause I think he was from Georgia.
D.S.:	I don't know which one he is; I would have to figure it out by doing the math.
Elsie Thomas:	But I knew he was from down in Georgia. But there were two or three of them, but I can't remember, because the one that had a brother here too in the government, he was from New York...
D.S.:	Roosevelts, you are probably talking about, the Roosevelts...
Elsie Thomas:	Roosevelts were from down here in Virginia, yeah 'cause I've been down to his home. That's why I know...
D.S.:	How did you end up down there? Do you remember the beginning of any of those relationships?
Elsie Thomas:	Oh I always was around them. I don't know why, but I seemed to have been around that White House a lot.
D.S.:	Wow. But you don't remember the first time?
Elsie Thomas:	It probably was when I was in school. Because I came down there, into that area to catch my bus. And it seems that the White House was not far from there.
D.S.:	16 th and 14 th Street; the main terminal used to be at 14 th where the post office was; so this, the White House is only a couple of blocks from there...
Elsie Thomas:	Yeah, because I have taken kids from the Hopkins House to roll Easter eggs. And I can tell you one person who was there, my daughter and, oh, what was her name? And she was my secretary. Lord, I know Deborah was there, JoAnne, do you know her?
D.S.:	No, I don't. But I remember taking my daughter to Easter egg roll too. It was fun. It's crowded now, you can barely get in but we did it in the old days.
Elsie Thomas:	'Cause I remember taking them there, and nobody said a word about it, 'cause everybody knew me anyway. I'd stop in there on my way home from school.
D.S.:	Ah, wow. I remember at some point you talking about meeting Eleanor Roosevelt, over here in Alexandria. Do you remember any more about that and how the relationship developed from that meeting?
Elsie Thomas:	It's been so long. Evidently, I was over there in Washington. If I was going to school, I stopped at the White House. Because I knew, the guy is there now...I think it's him but I know so many of them, I'm not sure....went to school with William over here.
D.S.:	Um, no. The one, you mean the President now? George Bush? No. Don't claim him; he's not one of us!
Elsie Thomas:	Well this guy went to school in Alexandria; the funny thing about it, his wife taught school up, somewhere towards Manassas. I don't why I can't think of it, 'cause I taught up there too.
D.S.:	Maybe it's the Carters you're thinking of. They were Georgia people,

	a lovely couple. And that sounds possible for that group...
Elsie Thomas:	'Cause I knew the man from Georgia.
D.S.:	That's who it is. He's very wonderful, very active with the Habitat for Humanity now, building houses for people.
Elsie Thomas:	I think that's the one who went to school with William.
D.S.:	Now that's possible. He could have. I don't know that, but um...
Elsie Thomas:	[unintelligible] It seems like I know that somehow or other my family, the men folks somehow got tied up with...
D.S.:	Politics?
Elsie Thomas:	Uh-huh.
D.S.:	Well, they were lawyers and they were educated black men and all through the history of time people have sought council with us.
Elsie Thomas:	Yeah because Martin Luther King we were down, I was there. I was one that met him first.
D.S.:	You met him first, Dr. King?
Elsie Thomas:	Yes. 'Cause I was knocking on doors getting people to understand the Negroes' problems and everything that they could do and everything. And it was Martin Luther King's door I knocked on. And somehow or another, I recognized him. He wasn't powerful as he looked like after he came up here with us, the people began to know who he was.
D.S.:	Right.
Elsie Thomas:	We were the ones who brought him up here to this little place just after you come in on 14 th Street and had him speak.
D.S.:	I was there. I was twelve years old during that march.
Elsie Thomas:	Really?
D.S.:	I was there with my grandparents.
Elsie Thomas:	And then later we went to the place that goes up high, and we went all the way up to the top.
D.S.:	Lincoln Memorial.
Elsie Thomas:	Do you know this person? This is my son, William Thomas. [Session interrupted.] [End]