Black History Month 2016

in Lexington, Virginia

A series of interviews with prominent members of the African American community, sponsored by the Historic Lexington Foundation

Historic Lexington Foundation

Irma Blake Thompson

Interview conducted on March 29, 2012, by Beverly Tucker, Trustee, Historic Lexington Foundation

Location of interview: Mrs. Thompson's home in Buena Vista, Virginia

BT: Let's begin with the date of your birth and where you were born.

IT: May 27,1917. I am ninety-five years old. I was born in that house right next door.

BT: What are the names of your parents?

IT: Matthew E. Blake and Edith Twitty Blake. My father was the minister of the United Methodist Episcopal Church here in Buena Vista. That is the church . . . down on this street. My daughter is ministering there now.

BT: Did you live in that house as a child?

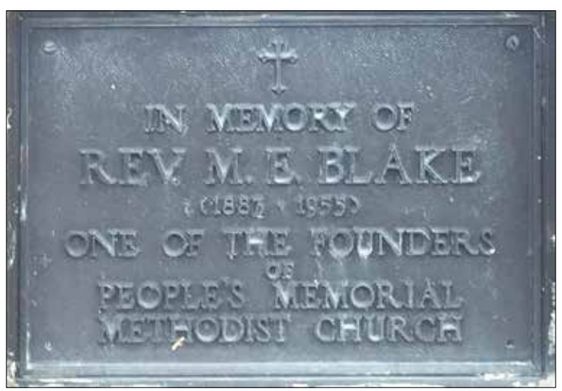
IT: I have lived on this street all my life, only moving from one side to the other. I lived next door, across the street and back.

BT: How long have you lived in this house?

IT: About fifty years, maybe even longer.

BT: Did you and your husband buy this home?

IT: Yes.



Plaque honoring Ms. Thompson's father at the entrance to the United Methodist Episcopal Church

BT: So your children grew up in this house.

IT: Yes, here and across the street.

BT: So you had a little family compound here.

IT: Yes.

BT: That's nice.

I T: It was, My aunt and uncle lived next door. Another lady on the street kept watch over all the children and if they misbehaved she would tell on them. They didn't like that but it was a good thing. I was watched too. So were my children.

BT: Tell me about your children.

IT: I have three: a son John Edward Thompson — we call him Tony and that's because I wanted a girl and I had picked out the name Tony for a girl; when it was a boy, we called him that anyway — he lives in Silver Springs, Maryland, retired, but does security for a school And I have a daughter, Danta Thompson Johnson. She is the minister. And another son, William Blake Thompson.

BT: Does Danta live nearby?

IT: Yes, she lives across the street.

BT: Tell me about your schooling.

IT: I went to school here in Buena Vista. Walked to the all-black school. We could carry our lunch or we could come home for lunch. I usually came home for lunch. I went to the seventh grade here. Then I went to Lylburn Downing in Lexington. There we could only get two years of high school and then we would have to find somewhere else to go. I went there two years. I'd catch the train every morning at 7:30am to Lexington and since I got there before school started, I would stay with a family until time to go. Then after school I would stay with them until 5:30 p.m. and catch the train back to Buena Vista. After two years we, the blacks, had to figure out a way to finish highschool. My aunt was working for a family in Bluefield. The State College had a high school at the college. The family there suggested that I go and board in the dormitory and finish my last two years of school there. My parents were determined that I would continue school and so I went there for one year but at the end of that year the school closed. I didn't know where to go then. But as I say, my parents were determined I would have an education. We went to Lynchburg. There was a family there that was just like my own family. I had always called them "Aunt" and " Uncle" and he was the principal at Dunbar High School. The only problem was that I had taken Latin at Bluefield and they required French at this school. My uncle said you can go to Russberg. They have dormitories there and you can board.

[The phone rings and it is Irma's son William in San Antonio. Each of her children calls daily.]

Conley Hall, Bluefield State College

IT: I stayed in the dormitory and my uncle would see to it that I could graduate with one year of French and one year of Latin. I stayed in the dormitory for about a month. I guess I was spoiled and homesick so I went to live with the principal and his wife. They had two sons. One was teaching me and the other was in college. We always felt like brothers and sister.

BT: You had so many people that were interested in you.

IT: Yes, and my parents would not give up on this matter of education. I then went to Virginia Union in Richmond. The next year we just didn't have the money for me to go back at that time. So I stayed at home that year and baby sat for $2 a week. My mother was working as a cook for a family and my father was a janitor for the Parry McCluer School. I worked for a family too. They were nice to me for a while. He was a forester and they had a little boy. She told me they were going to have to move and wanted me to go with them. I said I could not go. She asked why and I said, "Because I'm going back to college this fall." She said, "Why would *you* need to go to college?" I said, "Because I don't want to have to do this the rest of my life." When I went back the next day, she said, "We don't need you anymore." She fired me.

BT: How did that feel to you?

IT: I felt bad about it. To think that she would feel that way about me going to college.

BT: You would hope that she would have encouraged you.

IT: I know, that was just it! I went to work for another lady. I learned how to drive a car and then I taught her how to drive. Not long after that she decided she didn't need me anymore. She could drive herself. I worked for $2 a week. I went to work for another lady and one day when I got there the milkman was standing by the door and said there was nobody there. The lady had packed up in the middle of the night and had taken the little child and left Buena Vista. My working wasn't . . . .

Still my parents were determined to get me through college. After that year I decided to go back to Bluefield and live in the dormitory. I stayed there for two years, which made three years total. I got a "normal professional" degree. I could teach with that. My first job was in Rockbridge County. I was in Goshen and boarded with a family there. My salary was $65 a month. The white teachers were making $100 a month and I laugh now because I decided I needed a car. I went down to Decker Chevrolet. The man said he would sell me a car and we figured it out that the payments would be $12 a month. I told him I would have to think about it. I was paying $12 a month for room and board. I was trying to figure out if I could make it and I did! I bought that car, a Chevrolet.

BT: Were your parents as determined about all their children as they were about you?

IT: I'm the only child. They were married and he worked for Dr. Gorman. They lived with the people that I had lived with when I went to high school.

BT: Describe your parents. What things do you remember that they said that helped form your life? I'm sure your father had many things to share.

IT: They did not want me to have to do the things that they had to do. My Mother had to go in somebody's kitchen and cook. Everybody said I was spoiled, and I probably was. They had been married for eleven years before I was born.

BT: You must have been a surprise.

IT: Yes, I was. I was born in that house next door.

BT: Did a doctor come to deliver you?

IT: Yes, Dr. Mapp. My parents were certain that I was going to do the right thing. They encouraged me to have friends. They sat me down and talked to me about things.. The boys from school would come by sometimes and they could not stay too late like kids do now. When something would come up, they knew how to handle it.

BT: Do you remember your grandparents?

IT: I remember my grandmother. My grandfather was dead. I had a grandmother in Botetourt County that used to come and visit us. She was a little lady. One time she came and I said, "Grandma, let's go walking," and we did, over on Magnolia Street. I ran and left her and came back home. I don't remember what my parents said, but she came on back. The other grandmother lived up on Stuartsburg. It is the road that goes down toward the river. We walked to Stuartsburg every Sunday. We walked the railroad tracks.

BT: Would you go there after church for Sunday dinner?

Irma Blake Thompson

IT: Well, my mother worked on Sundays — she cooked for a family. She didn't have to cook their supper on Sunday but she did have to do their dinner. After dinner she would come home and we would go. I'm not sure if Daddy was preaching during that time or not. Anyway, Momma and I would walk that track and go see my grandmother. I'm not sure when we had a car. We had a Model T. Some people use that road to go to Lexington now. It goes by Mountain View. My friend Ann goes that way.

BT: Tell me how you met your husband.

IT: I knew Johnny in school. After I came back I would see him around at different places. I stayed with a family in Lexington. We lived on Tucker Street and they lived on Fuller. Then after I came back and started teaching we would see each other at parties. He came down. Edlow Morrison used to date a lady down the street. Edlow said, " I'm going to bring somebody down to see you." That started things. We married in 1940.

BT: How long were you married?

IT: He died in 1992. We were married fifty-two years.

BT: It sounds as if you all worked hard but you did not live in poverty.

IT: You know, I laugh and say , "We were poor, but I didn't know it." My first new coat, winter coat, was when I went to college. The people my mother worked for — the man was president of a paper mill —The wife had two nieces older than I was. Every summer they would bring me the clothes they had worn. When I went to college, an evening dress that I wore was one that they had given me. We were poor, but as I said, I didn't know it. I had what I needed.

BT: Tell me about the school where you taught..

IT: I taught in Glasgow for thirteen years. Then I taught here. The school was where the police station is now. That was the Park Avenue School. I had to teach in the auditorium because there was no room for me. Johnny worked at Parry McCluer. We went to Richmond and picked out a trailer to be brought back here for me to teach in.

BT: What did you teach?

IT: It was a bit confusing. I taught first grade for half a day and then fourth grade for the other half of the day. The first grade would come to school and then go to the other teacher.

BT: Were these all black children?

IT: Yes, and when I think about it, when integration came the white teachers got their contracts early in the year. Mrs. Ragsdale, the lead teacher, and I did not get our contracts until May. I still don't know what they intended. Maybe we were not going to get contracts or what.

BT: What was it like during the integration of schools?

IT: You know, I didn't have any problems. Mrs. Ragsdale and I were told that one of us would go to Parry McCluer and teach the fourth grade and the other would stay here and teach the first grade. Since Mrs. Ragsdale was the head teacher of the two of us, she got to choose. She didn't want the lower grade, so she went to Parry McCluer and I went to Enderly. When I got there the teachers were in a meeting with the principal. I said, "I'm sorry I'm late but I had to wait for Mrs. Ragsdale to make up her mind which grade she was going to teach." We all laughed. I had no problems.

Buena Vista Colored School

BT: In other aspects of your life were you comfortable? Say, in town?

IT: I was very comfortable. My father was well known, and I remember a funny story. We used to buy groceries on credit and pay at the end of the month. We would say, "Charge it." One day my father sent me to the post office to buy a stamp for two cents. On the way there, I somehow lost the two pennies I was to use for the stamps. When I got to the post office, the man asked me what I wanted and I told him. He said that would be two cents. I said, "Charge it." He said, "We don't charge stamps." I think he let me have them.

Some days I would go to work with my Daddy, and he would let me sit in a classroom and read books. There was a library, a wooden building where the Chinese restaurant is now. I was walking toward the library and just decided I would go in. The lady at the desk looked at me and asked, "What do you want?" I said "I came to get a library book." She said, "You can't get a library book." I turned around and walked out. I knew when I went in there I couldn't get a book. I don't know why I did it. I knew I could get books at the school. I also used to see the girls at Southern Sem sitting outside together talking and laughing and I used to think, "Oh, if I could go and sit down with them and talk to them, that would be so wonderful." But you know after integration, I had no desire to do that anymore.

BT: Was there someone in your life that inspired you?

IT: Well, the people I lived with. They were like parents to me. My parents inspired me. I knew later they had to borrow money from a family. I never stopped to think about where the money came from. I wish I knew that. But they always managed.

BT: What did you do for fun?

United Methodist Episcopal Church, Buena Vista, where Ms. Thompson's father and daughter have been ministers

IT: One summer I went with a friend to Atlantic City to work. I was a maid in a hotel. I lived with a friend's family. I used to go to Philadelphia. They tried to get me to stay in Philadelphia and teach, but I came back here.

BT: Did you ever sing or play an instrument?

IT: I took piano lessons and I wish I could play now.

BT: Is this little church still quite active? It is the one where your daughter serves?

IT: Yes, we have a very good turnout.

BT: Do you remember the Depression?

IT: Yes I remember. We lived with my parents. I remember that pork chops were thirty cents a pound.

BT: You must have been so proud when you and your husband bought this home.

IT: Yes we were thrilled.

BT: Do you remember listening to the radio?

IT: Oh yes, I loved to listen to "Amos 'n' Andy." The people next door would come over and we would all sit and listen to "Amos 'n' Andy."

BT: Do you remember "Fibber McGee and Molly"?

IT: Oh, yes, and when we moved in here, we were the first on the street to have television. Johnny would put the TV in the window and turn it out facing the yard and then put chairs outside and invite our family and friends over to sit and watch. They liked to watch the boxing matches. My parents played whip with the people next door. They were the only ones they played with.

BT:I know you have been very active in various civic endeavors, volunteer work. How did you happen to get interested in doing that?

IT: Well, it started with going to a meeting and then seeing a need. I saw a need for a food bank and Shirly Flint and I worked hard on getting one. They moved to a new location and the next week the flood came and we were washed away and lost everything. I went to see the people at Southern Sem looking for food and clothing for the flood victems. I took over that effort and then stayed with the food bank for many years. With the other things I have done . . . I had a friend that was on the Planning Commission. She was about to rotate off and I wanted to take her place. I went to the mayor and asked to be put on the commission. I would be the first black to be a part of that group. Several wrote letters for me. I wrote a letter to the commission and said that I thought we were being taxed without representation and I wanted to have a way to say something. I was appointed and then stayed on for ten years. Other things came about because friends would ask and I couldn't say no. When the food bank closed and then reopened, I felt it was time for someone else to take over. I went out to Dabney Lancaster Community College and took three computer classes. Last year I was honored to receive the Dabney Lancaster College Medallion of Merit. I was very proud.

BT: You have seen a great deal in your lifetime. Do you remember President Franklin D. Roosevelt.?

IT: Yes, I do. I can't remember which president it was but I remember my friends fearing that if he lost, it would cause them to lose their jobs. I don't recall who that was.

BT: Do you remember when President John F. Kennedy was shot?

IT: Oh, yes, I do. I was teaching at Park Avenue School, and Mrs. Ragsdale came in to my class and said that the president had been shot and they were closing the school.

BT: It was a horrible time.

IT: My mother was an invalid for fifteen years and I kept her here in this house, in this room. I had her bed in here, and I put a cot in the dining room so that I could sleep there when she was restless.

BT: What was her illness?

IT: She had a stroke. I think if she had lived now, she could have been helped medically. But then . . . I had to work, so I had someone come in during the day, starting about 7:30 a.m., but before they arrived I would bathe her, change her bed, and fix her breakfast. I don't regret it one bit. My children, Tony, the oldest, could do any and all things for her that I did. She used to cry. The first time Tony had to change her, she cried because she was so embarrassed. But I have told Tony, If ever I get down, I know you know how to take care of me so don't you say you don't know how. I even had to go to summer school during that time but somehow we worked through it. I know Tony would take care of me if I needed him to.

BT: What do you see as the most pressing problem our country is facing?

IT: The economy. It's bad. I'd like to see the end of war. I just wonder what will happen. Everything is blamed on President Obama, and I think it is mostly because he is black. I really do. When he went in

— people have forgotten how bad it was and . . . . Oh, that Fox News! And that Hannity! I feel there are some who feel the same way Fox News does and that bothers me greatly. I am also concerned about this boy [Trayvon Martin] that was shot by the neighborhood watch man [George Zimmerman, in 2012]. I worry about my grandchildren.

BT: If you could leave advice for those grandchildren, what would you wish to say?

IT: Well, for the young blacks, I would say, "Be sure to get an education. Then see that happens for those who come after you. They will carry on, especially for the black race. Here I see the young ones just drop out of school and they just don't seem to care. We need all groups of people to know that we are all the same. God made all of us. My daughter has her masters in counseling and she works with lower-income people. She has been very successful in turning them around. I worry about things as they are.

BT: Isn't there a reunion of the people who went to the colored school?

IT: Yes, I have not taken part since the first one. I don't know anybody anymore. When you get to be as old as I am, everybody is gone. I have one person that I am still in contact with. Oh, one interesting story. There was an author named Robert Greer. I had read several of his books and I realized one day that I thought I knew him. I knew his mother, father, aunt, and uncle. We were close friends. So I decided that I was going to write him a letter. It took me a long time to decide but I finally did it. I wrote him a letter last fall and I got a letter back from him. It was not a form letter, either. He said he was glad to hear from me, someone who knew his family. I took that letter to my book club.

BT: You are in a book club? What do you read?

IT: Sometimes I'm not interested in what they read, but I go and listen. Sometimes after I listen, I may get interested and then I will read it. I read mysteries. James Patterson.

BT: Did you ever read James Baldwin?

IT: Yes, but I don't remember much about it.

BT: I took Edlow to a James Baldwin Project Interview at Washington and Lee a couple of weeks ago and of course, he was the hit of the day. Irma, I could stay all day but I don't want to overstay my welcome. You have been so gracious to have me.

IT: Well, I really enjoyed it.

BT: You are so special. I am glad we met. Thank you for letting me come. ■

Illustrations

Church plaque: Robert S. Keefe

Bluefield State College: the college

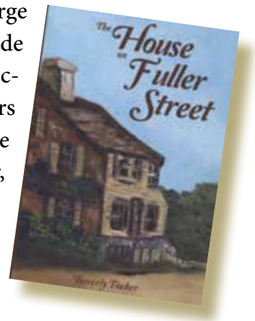
Portrait of Irma Thompson: Bruce Macdonald

Buena Vista Colored School: H. E. Ravenhorst, from *The Architecture of Historic Rockbridge* (2015)

United Methodist Episcopal Church: Robert S. Keefe

About this series

Quietly nestled in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley in the Blue Ridge Mountains is a small town called Lexington, Virginia. It is a relatively quiet place, a village in its nature, a college town that attracts a wide range of interesting people. History is the culture of Lexington; two of its well-known sons are Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. There are others: its sons and daughters, artists, musicians, professors, coeds, cadets, many such as George C. Marshall, who have gone to take their place as citizens of the larger world. Equal parts of pride are recognized in its heroes and those who are not so well known, Many of those deserve our recognition and admiration, for they guide us with their stories from the past. They are our caretakers of memories that reveal what many of us never knew, yet too valuable to remain unrecorded. The Historic Lexington Foundation, under the guidance of its Executive Director, Don Hasfurthur, with this project makes some of those memories available.



These oral histories comprise the substance of the book *The House on Fuller Street* by Beverly Tucker with illustrations by Bruce Macdonald (Mariner Press, 2013; available on Amazon.com)