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

Ted DeLaney

Interview conducted August 9, 2011, in Dr. DeLaney's office at Washington and Lee University, by Dr. Beverly Tucker, Executive Board, Historic Lexington Foundation

BT: Dr. DeLaney, would you tell us the place and date of your birth?

TD: 7 Tucker Street, Lexington, Virginia — October 18,1943.

My maternal grandparents and paternal grandfather were all from Rockbridge County. My maternal grandmother was from Natural Bridge. My maternal grandfather was from Brownsburg, Virginia. Only one, Grandfather DeLaney, came from Knoxville, Tennessee. So three grandparents were from Rockbridge County.

BT: Do you have any knowledge of early ancestors, perhaps slaves?

TD: I have no knowledge of that at all. My great grandparents , in the 1930s, lived on a property that was to become the Nelson Street Bridge. It was built across their front yard. The front porch would have been under the bridge. You could almost touch that house from the middle of the bridge. That house was torn down a few decades ago. Great Grandfather Richard Jones was a builder — he built the addition on Randolph Street Church and directed the building of the First Baptist Church. He made bricks. I know more about him than any of the other grandparents.

BT: I am sure you have seen a great deal of change here. What is most obvious?

TD: Well, one of the changes that is greatest is in the black community which is pretty much diminished . The black community was much larger when I was growing up. A great portion of the black properties now seem to be occupied by Washington and Lee University students who rent from investors. Many houses that were occupied by black families no longer have permanent families;

certainly not black families. So the black community has changed a great deal. When I was growing up the black community was somewhat middle class. People were poor but had incredible values. The mind set was: The way you kept your house painted. You bought paint on payday and you went as far as that paint would go then next pay day you would buy more. It might take a year to get the whole house painted, but there was pride. Those values seem not to have been handed down. The other thing is that those people had a strong sense of community, which has been lost to a large extent. The blacks here today, I don't know who they are. It might be me because I am here at the university every day and I may be missing them by not being out there in the community.

BT: Is the First Baptist Church still a vibrant part of the black community?

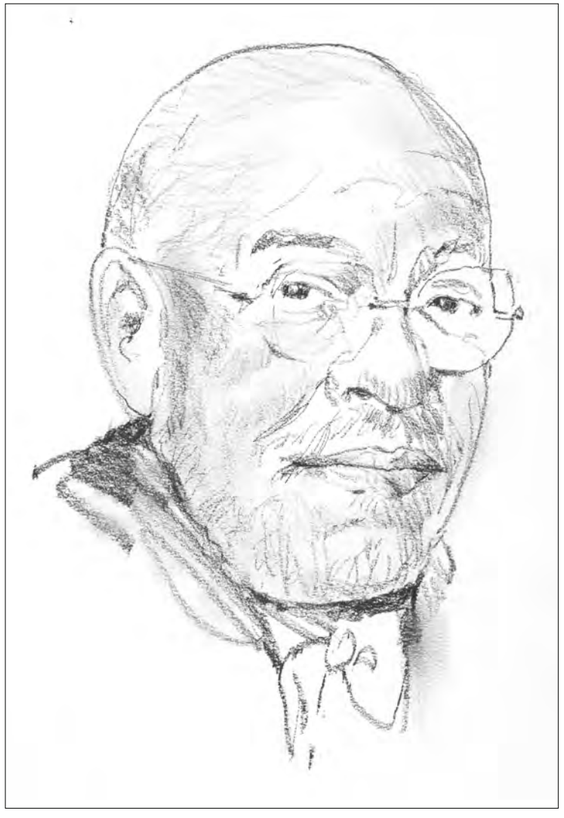
TD: I don't think so. There are two other black churches in town now and they are full. They are more pentecostal in orientation. The Henry Street Church of Christ and God is full and another Church of Christ and God near where my grandparents used to live is also full. And the Randolph Street Methodist has only a few dozen people in attendance on any given Sunday, but the Pentecostal and Henry Street Church of Christ and God are full. They have drawn from the other two churches mentioned.

BT: Why is that?

TD: I'm not really sure and the tragedy is that there is an incredible history in both those churches. They have been invited many times to merge with Trinity and other churches and because of their history they have declined, preferring to stay where they are. Their people are generally not wealthy so one wonders how they receive enough contributions to continue. Randolph Street Methodist's preacher is a white man who, works at Washington and Lee in computer services; that's his day job to make it financially. Music may be the reason that the newer churches are having more success. I visited one of them and the music was very strong and persuasive.

BT: Do you think it is a theological issue?

TD: No, I think it is the music. I visited the Church of Christ and God and was sitting there just amazed at how the people were so enthusiastic.



Theodore C. DeLaney

The sermon didn't do much for me and I don't want to sound like a snob but the sermon was not scholarly based, not an argument being made — rather, a "moved by the spirit," which doesn't always translate into something I follow very easily.

BT: Did you meet your wife here in Lexington?

TD: Yes, I met my wife here, but she was not from Lexington. My wife's father was in the Army for twenty-three years. He inherited a house on Preston Street and, having been away for many years, returned to Lexington. I met my wife in 1968 and we married in 1973. She attended high school in New York and her four years at East Hampton High School had a great influence on her.

She returned to Lexington with a New York accent which she very much enjoyed. The Lexington City Treasurer retired in 1975. Mrs. DeLaney had graduated from college and was appointed to that position where she has been ever since — a long-standing position of thirty-seven years now.

BT: And you have a son?

TD: Yes. He is an attorney, having finished at the Washington and Lee law school, as did his wife. He is a real nice guy. When he graduated from the W&L law school, I was allowed to give him his diploma. They live in Santa Monica. And this is my little granddaughter, Stella.

BT: She is precious.

BT: Was it your father that had a barber shop?

7 Tucker Street today

TD: No, it was my grandfather, Charles Franklin, my mother's father. There is a little book about Lexington and there is a picture of the barbershop and the Washington's Restaurant, which was in the same building He ran that barber shop for fifty years.

BT: And what did your father do for a living?

TD: He was a bellhop at the Natural Bridge Hotel. My parents divorced when I was eleven years old. My father only had a sixth-grade education. He eventually became the doorman at Hotel Roanoke.

BT: Did your mother work?

TD: My mother was a barber. One of seven children, only one son — my grandfather taught his daughters how to barber. My mother and her twin sister were both barbers in Staunton on Main Street. It was something of a novelty thing, female barbers. Two of my mother's other sisters were also barbers in that shop.

BT: Did you live in poverty?

TD: No, my family was poor, but we always had food and clothing, never needy. Mother always worked. It's a matter of perspective. Poverty has to be examined on a one-on-one basis, and it is also how people react to their situations. We were never on relief. My mother was married twice and two sets of children. My grandmother, mother's mother, finished college at Virginia State University in 1909 and became a teacher for a while, but back then there was a rule forbidding teaching if one was pregnant. Since she was having children, she had to do something else. My grandmother decided to take in laundry, and that caused resentment with her children, one of which was my mother. She took in the laundry but the daughters had to *do* the laundry and then return it in a wagon they pulled. They resented that she did not use her education and that resulted in work for them. My mother remembers it as her mother simply directing their labor. That's not the grandmother I knew. One of my mother's sisters is still alive and she never has a good word to say about her mother. She felt that my grandmother's education could have benefited the family. There were other black ladies, her contemporaries, that did teach, some never married or had children — just maiden ladies who were school teachers. That's just sort of the background that I come out of .As far as my own immediate family goes, my father was an addicted gambler, so there was this crisis of the fact that by the time he got home on payday, there was nothing, there was a source of real contention and subsequently ended in divorce. When I was growing up, my mother was the major source of income with her barbering.

BT: Was there a place to gamble?

TD: No, but there were plenty of black men who liked to play, and my father always lost. My father was evidently not very good at it and he lost more often than not, coming home on payday with nothing. My mother found this intolerable.

BT: What was your neighborhood like?

TD: Well, it depends at what point in my life. I spent most early life at 7 Tucker Street, my grandparents' home. It was lovely inside, the parlor was always kept shining from Johnson's Wax and a heavy hand buffer. A beautiful place.

I was born at 7 Tucker Street, just behind Dr. Crews' office. My grandparents' house was lovely inside. You could never go in the parlor, which was kept ready for company. The floors were made of narrow oak and kept gleaming. My grandmother had her own kindergarten. It was so highly respected that Lylburn Downing would let her students begin grammar school in the second grade. My cousin was actually allowed to enter in the third grade because she had been in my grandmother's school. She was very smart and started college at fifteen. My parents had an apartment at 218 Massey Street, a nice place then, really pristine. When my mother remarried we lived on Maury Street. I finished second through twelfth grades at Lylburn Downing in 1961.

It was a bad time because at the time, black students did not take the S.A.T. Instead we had to take the United Negro College Fund for Historically Black colleges. I got letters with financial support from Morehouse College. My mother said no to Morehouse, and that was a difficult moment because there was no financial aid or Pell Grants back then and no money available to me. My mother was alarmed by the freedom rides and demonstrations, feeling they were dangerous and life-threatening. So I stayed out of school that first year out of high school. I was expected to work. Not even eighteen years old, it was very difficult for a black kid to find a job. I worked as a butler in one of the fraternity houses but I realized very soon that I did not want to spend my life that way. I worked briefly in the mess hall at Virginia Military Institute but it was depressing and I was appalled at the experience. They assigned me to an area called the "vegetable room.". It was automated with a large machine that would literally spin around and take the skin off the potatoes There was also a large device that would chop lettuce for salad. They put me in a room with this guy, hardly much older than me, and he was somewhat of a showoff. It was near graduation and the school closing, so we expected large crowds. And this guy, showing off, lost a finger in the salad. The thing that was amazing to me was that in this situation the food service people had a difficult time deciding what to do . It was like "We don't want to waste the salad, but somewhere in the salad, there is a human finger." Eventually a person in charge of the salad said, "If a cadet finds this finger in his salad, we're going to be in trouble. We've got to toss the salad out." I was in absolute amazement that there would be any discussion about it. I was so miserable there that I didn't stay very long. I tried to enlist in the service but due to severe allergies and some other issues I was not accepted. So I ended up with mostly nothing to do.

I think my mother knew me better than I knew myself and she was feeling sorry for me. She remembered that when I was fifteen years old, I was interested in going into the Catholic religious life. My father rarely had anything to say about anything but at the time both parents vetoed that. They were not Catholic and I was a convert. My mother then comes to me and says, "You were always interested in going into the religious life — why don't you try that now?" Though I was really no longer feeling that, at my mother's urging, I went to Garrison, New York, to enter the monastery of Greenwood Friars. I stayed seven months. I loved most aspects of the life. I loved the community. The most difficult thing for me was their idea of obedience because you were sometimes ordered to do things that were fairly humiliating, testing you. I really resented that. I started having normal periods of doubt, then I went through a period of time when I wasn't sure I even believed. They asked, "If you don't believe, why are you here?" At that point I decided to leave and I came back here.

I ended up with two jobs. First, working as a waiter at the Mayflower Hotel. That job was a hysterical experience. John and Marcella Stanberg, they ended up coming to Lexington with their daughter. The Mayflower never had much business. There was an interesting dynamic that I wasn't prepared for. The Stanbergs were very proud of their Roman Catholicism and because I was a Roman Catholic, I got treated differently from the other employees which was sometimes funny, other times sad. They would send me to the bank. They trusted me because they said, "We know where he prays." It was awkward because I was the only black who did not work in the kitchen. I was the only man who waited, and they treated the women waiters despicably. Once Mrs. Stanberg said "Where are you going with that Tabasco?" I said I am taking it to the table that asked for Tabasco. "Why are you doing that?" There was a waitress there named Gypsy and I said, "Because Gypsy told me to." Then she dressed Gypsy down and said "You G–– D–– son of a b––." Poor Gypsy. Then Mrs. Stanberg went back to being a good Catholic. How do you treat someone like that and then you boast about your religious identification? Once a year his sister would come to visit. She traveled with a nun. So here was this old lady, traveling with a nun in full habit, in Lexington ,Virginia. I can remember one time the companion was standing behind the kitchen when I came through and I thought, "Oh my God, I've hit a nun !" She was just wonderful.

The thing that caused me to leave was one night a tour bus came in. The dining room was beautiful, with lovely white linen table clothes. The daughter was the chef. Her name was Dorothy. Dorothy had not prepared enough food for that evening. But she had prepared a local favorite of fried apples. Her father had been in a car accident years before and he had a built-up shoe and he carried his arm as if he had had a stroke. Anyway things were very slow coming out of the kitchen and he lost his temper. He starts screaming and yelling at his daughter, and you could see the people in the dining room looking at each other perhaps wondering, "Where have we come?" Screaming was peppered with obscenities including the "f" word. There was a waitress named Nadine and she goes in the kitchen to take up for Dorothy — and why she thought she could do that, I don't know. They were over on the other side of the kitchen, and the father picked up the tray of fried apples with his good arm and hurled it at them. They were standing still on the other side of the kitchen screaming and of course all these poor people could hear it. I thought, "As poor as I am, I don't need this and I'm never going back," and that night at the end of the night I left. I think they were truly hurt and later apologized, My thought was they are only apologizing because I was Catholic. It was silly but I had to find another job.

BT: How long had you been there?

TD: Six months, but I was also working another job.. I was working at Washington and Lee as a janitor. That was August 1963 and I was nineteen years old, soon to be twenty. W &L was a lovely

place to work. They didn't pay much, but the employees were treated well and they were loyal to the university. I worked in the biology department for a year. There were no clear lines about what you could be asked to do. They needed a lab technician but did not have the budget to hire one, so they taught me what they needed. One professor made me his technical assistant for nineteen years, and I became quite comfortable in that job. In 1973 I got married and my finished Union College in 1979–80. I started taking courses for credit. I took history in an evening class at Virginia Military Institute, where they have an evening program for the adult community. I took history and — I got hooked. W&L had a benefit for staff that allowed us to take one class per semester. One day the dean of the school came to me and pointed out that I now had thirty-eight credits. He urged me to consider going full time, as that was a requirement for the last two years to earn a degree. My wife encouraged me to do that and she supported me in every way. Even though I was a bit reluctant to do it here, for fear of falling on my face, it made sense, so I did that. It was an absolutely incredible experience. There were three of us non-traditional students going through together and two of us finished first. We even took P.E. classes, only to learn later that we could have been exempt. But it was good and I was in the best shape of my life.

Upon graduation I went to teach at Asheville School for three years in North Carolina. While I was there, another W&L professor wrote to me and urged me to consider going to graduate school. I was really surprised. I was forty-five years old, but once again my wife urged me to do it, so in 1988 I went to the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg for a Ph.D. I took the comprehensive exams in 1991 and completed the dissertation in 1995 while teaching at State University in Rochester.

BT: What was the focus of your dissertation?

TD: I had thought of doing the dissertation on Free Blacks in Virginia, but my adviser reminded me of my timing and thought it would take too long. I needed to get back to my family. He suggested something quick and easy. That turned out to be a joke. I knew the librarian at William and Mary quite well and she suggested a need for something on Julia Gardiner Tyler, the second wife of President John Tyler. She was thirty years his junior, married during the fourth year of his presidency, but she transformed the role of the First Lady and how the White House was perceived and used. Though she was a true New England girl, after marrying Tyler she devoted herself to becoming a true southern woman and slaveholder. As it turned out, there were seventeen linear feet of her papers at Yale University and also materials at the Library of Congress and the Virginia Historical Society. I traveled and spent time at Yale and because there were so many primary sources, I found myself traveling much more than I had thought I would. It took two years for the research and two years for the writing. My stay in Rochester was made more pleasant and challenging with bringing my young son up to go to a good Jesuit School. The weather was also challenging, with the lake effect bringing snow and seventeen-degree weather almost daily from early fall to late spring. At times the weather was unbearable and I was acting as a single parent, but I have no regrets, *no regrets.* Coming back here was a mixed blessing. I would likely have done more scholarship somewhere else. I have a hard time saying no and there were so many good people who asked me to do things. For example I was asked to serve on the Stonewall Jackson House board by Mary Coulling. I dearly love Mary Coulling and could never say no to her. But I did spread myself too thin.

Julia Gardiner Tyler, c. 1855

Franklin ColoredTourist Home

BT: I so appreciate your time and before I go I would like to ask you if I have left out anything that you think important that I have neglected to ask?

TD: I do know that the Historic Lexington Foundation is interested in the preservation of historic properties and I would mention a few that would be appropriate for their consideration. There was a time when white tourists would come to Lexington driven by their black drivers in their Cadillacs. There were several very nice places for the white tourists to stay. There was the R. E. Lee Hotel, the Dutch Inn and the Mayflower Hotel. But the blacks had to stay in tourist inns. There was a lighted sign at the Franklin's Tourist Home, at 9 Tucker Street. There was a "Green Book" for Black Travelers. It was essential for it listed acceptable places for the blacks to stay. I also think places that once belonged to people such as Dr. A.W. Pleasants, a black physician, should be given attention. It is now a tenement. Another property belonged to another black physician, Dr. John Gilmore. These were just a few of the important people and places in which Historic Lexington Foundation should take a serious interest. I think the one they have focused on may end up being a white elephant. It takes so much money to restore it and it is in a difficult location for the money it will cost to come out even.

BT: May I read your dissertation?

TD: Certainly, but it has been so long ago now that I read it and think, "Did I do that?"

BT: You obviously did that and much more, Dr. DeLaney. Thank you. ■

Illustrations

Portrait of Ted DeLaney: Bruce Macdonald

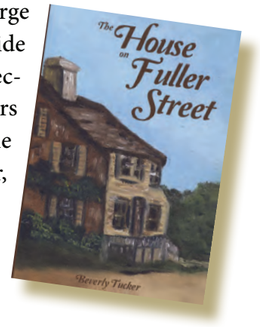
7 Tucker Street: Robert S. Keefe

Julia Gardiner Tyler: Library of Congress

Franklin Tourist Home: Dan Pezzoni, from *The Architecture of Historic Rockbridge* (2015)

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)