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

Falvorees Jones Jr.

Interview conducted on August 19, 2012
by Beverly Tucker, board member, Historic Lexington Foundation

BT: Mr. Jones, would you state your full name.

FJ: My given name is Falvorees Jones Jr. But here in Lexington, they call me Sonny. My wife calls me "Fal." The first time we came back to visit, and somebody called me Sonny, my wife didn't know who they were talking about. My father was Falvorees Jones Sr. I am junior, and my son is the second and his son is the third. We found out that there are only five Falvorees Joneses in the United States and four of them are in our family. There seems to be a gentleman up in New York with the same name. If you ask me where the name came from I would have to say I don't know. My grandmother worked for a Dr. Vorees and it may have come from there but we don't know.

BT: Where were you born?

VJ: I was born over at 203 Downing Street on January 18, 1930. That was actually my home — I was born at the Stonewall Jackson Hospital. My mother was Sarah Mildred Jones. I was an only child. Later on I had a first cousin who lost his mother, my mother's sister. My parents adopted James and brought him up as my brother. Bernita Davis is his daughter. Later in this interview, I will talk about one of your board members, Rosa Wiggins. Her aunt was one of my teachers.

BT: Tell me about your childhood.

FJ: Well, as I said, I was an only child, something of interest. A lot of black folks worked at VMI as waiters. We never knew we were poor, 'cause any food left on the table at VMI was free to bring home. We had bacon, steaks and everything. Jerry Rhome, he had an uncle called Speed King and he could

take a newspaper and wrap them so thick that you could pour milk in it and it wouldn't leak. So all of the black fellows would keep newspapers around their tables so they could pour things in them. We saved coffee cans and we could take things home in the cans. We ate so well. We didn't know we were poor.

We lived so close to the school that I could wait until I could hear the bell ring and I would take off and I could be there before classes started. If I was late, Daddy would threaten me with a BB gun.

BT: Did you go home for lunch?

FJ: Yes, James and I went home for lunch.

BT: Tell me what you remember about your mother and father.

FJ: I was fortunate to have a strong father. Daddy was one of the ones that was a man with a handshake. I was proud to be his son. When I come home and people say I am just like my daddy, I feel great pride. Mama was a domestic, and I never got to know her that well cause she worked seven days a week at VMI. Daddy would take her to work at 7 a.m. and she would work until 3 p.m., then come home and go back at 5 p.m. I had a sickly aunt who lived with us. James came just before we went to high school. James is no longer living, but he was a good man.

BT: So you went to Lylburn Downing in the first grade.

FJ: Yes, ma'am. I was there yesterday and remembered how it looked. The gym ceiling was so low that when we played basketball, we couldn't arch the ball. I do want to tell you, when we played football, we had to keep our grades up. When we started the year, we would have a good full team. Come the second six weeks and our English teacher, Miss Jemima Osborne — she was tough and she didn't give

Lylburn Downing School, 2012

nothing. You had to earn it! Anyway, by then the team was much smaller because Miss Jemima Osborne had passed out our grades and they weren't so good.

BT: Do you remember integration?

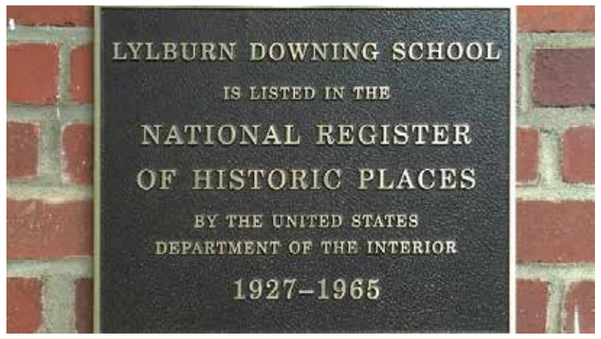
FJ; Yes. It had not happened when I left to go to West Virginia State College in 1951. I came back during summers. My friend and I ended up going up to Rhode Island to do summer work so that we could pay for school. I eventually went in to the Air Force. I went to New York for my training, and we used to have baseball tournaments. We played the "ground pounders" — the Army guys. I was the referee and I called one "ground pounder" out when he thought he was safe. It looked for a while that we would have a battle right then and there.

BT: Go back to your childhood if you will.

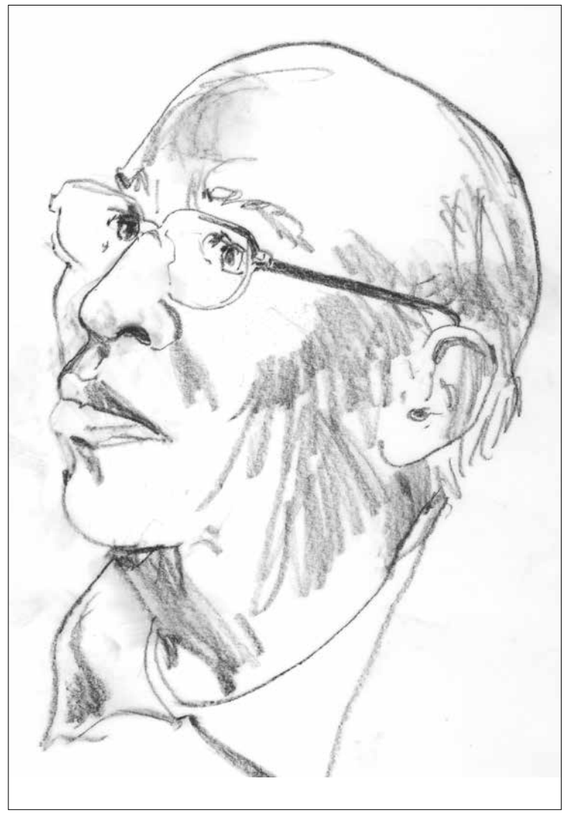
FJ: Well, yes, at the time, we were segregated and all our books were hand-me-downs from the white school. Many times pages were missing and torn and they were all scribbled on. We would go to a place on Randolph Street *[now the Red Hen Restaurant]* to get the books and even in poor condition, we had to pay for them. In our chemistry lab, we had two beakers. If they were to get broken, we were out of luck — no chemistry! Our teachers were tough. They either went to First Baptist Church or the Methodist Church. Come Sunday, if we had misbehaved, they would tell our parents and we would be in big trouble. We respected our teachers — and our elders.

BT: Did you feel negatively as far as segregation was concerned?

FJ: I can appreciate going in to the service. I think had I stayed around Lexington, I would have become a racist. Some of the mistreatments would have been a carry-over. But when I got to Korea, it was black and white together. I can say that we were all together. We were people facing an enemy together. Something else: People would say, the white people in the North were for you and the white people in the South were against you. You found out how wrong that was. A white person from the South, if they say they're your friend, you've got a friend for life. When they shake your hand, you have a bargain that you can trust. The white folks from the North, would pat you on the back, but have a knife right there while they were doing it. So you learned, like Daddy taught me. You respect people. You don't judge anybody. There are some black people that I wouldn't want to associate with. There are even some ministers that I can't follow. If you preach one thing then do something entirely different, I will tell them up front. Don't put my name down, I can't follow you.



Oh, something else I wanted to tell you. When I was at Lylburn Downing — well, if you asked me our school colors . . . we couldn't tell you what color we would be. One year VMI gave us some jerseys — next year, W&L — next year it would be the white high school. So we were the only technicolor team around. All different sizes, most didn't fit. One time we went up to play Addison in Roanoke. We had seventeen guys and they had about eighty. They surrounded us and they were beating us so bad that they would tell us where the play was coming and we still couldn't stop them. They would come and pat us on the head. One time, when we were playing basketball, we didn't have uniforms so we got some of those old undershirts, the tacky kind with the thin shoulder straps. We dyed them and cut out some numbers to put on them. Well we got to sweatin' and that dye started coming off on us. One time we went to play Salem. The first team was beatin' us so bad that they put in the second team and they were beatin' us so bad that they just put in four guys, then two, and finally one. He scored!



Falvorees (Sonny) Jones Jr.

BT: Why were you so bad?

FJ: We just didn't have no training. Who ever came along was our coach. Rosa Wiggins' daddy was our coach one year.

BT: Who were some of the people you knew back then?

FJ: Some of the wonderful teachers were Ms. Jessie Woodland, Miss Nellie White, Miss Laurana Gilmore, Miss Marin Mitchell and of course Miss Jemima Osborne. No kid that ever took English from her had any trouble in college.

BT: Tell me about your family.

FJ: Well, this is where my wife gets after me. I tell this story a lot. When I was in the service they sent me to Rochester, N.Y., then to New Rochelle. That's where I met her. She came in with friends and was standing at the jukebox. She was lovely. But she made up a name and said she had three children. Whoa! Later, I learned that it wasn't true and her real name was Mary Dixon.

BT: So you started to court Mary Dixon.

FJ: Well, the problem was, I was engaged to another woman and we were supposed to marry December of '51. I met Mary November '51. I forgot all about that other girl and getting married to her. I married Mary two years later after I came back from Korea. My daddy met Mary and he wrote me and said, "You'd better marry the girl, she's a good one."

BT: So you did, and then you had a family.

FJ: We had four children: Phyllis Ann Jones Stewart, Falvorees Jones II, David Bruce Jones, and M. Allison Jones.

All of the children went to college. We have a cosmopolitan family — one of everything. We have twelve grandchildren and twenty great-grandchildren.

BT: It is obvious that your father was the most influential person in your life.

FJ: This is it: My daddy's daddy, my grandfather, was white and Jewish, then his mother was black. Mama's folks were *[American]* Indian. I am a hybrid. This is the situation. I don't know what that turns out to be.

BT: So you have been married to Mary for a long time.

FJ: Yes, fifty-nine years come November. I have to say that God blessed me with a wonderful wife. I'm eighty-two and Mary is eighty. I tell my children, "Find yourself a partner."

BT: When did you come back to Virginia?

FJ: The house we live in was once lived in by my parents. I had always wanted the property and finally had the chance to buy it. So I did.

BT: What do you see as the biggest problem we have in our country at this time?

FJ: Well, let's just look at the problems with this election. It is almost back to days of a black-and-white situation. The ads are disgusting. There is too much negativity. People are against Obama because he is black and that's that. It is not good to go back.

BT: What changes do you see in Lexington?

FJ: Its growth. I can hardly identify where I lived. It's all-white now. VMI and W&L have bought up all the property and still want more. It is sad. We used to be able to watch the cadets play football down on their field. I learned a lot about my position and how to play it. There are slumlords now. They rent to students. You try to tell folks that they can't get enough money to turn around and buy something else. My mother was a domestic and my father operated the projector at the State Theater. He was also a janitor there. They worked hard to make ends meet. He said, "Work hard, keep your head down and do the right thing." I am on dialysis now and I am glad I can pay for it.

BT: What would you say to the younger generation?

FJ: I think about honesty, trust and education! I also believe in respecting older people.

BT: Young black males seem to be at such a loss.

FJ: Some young black athletes are used. I tell them to get an education. I also believe in savings. We were taught to pay our bills and do it on time. If you can't pay go to someone and arrange to pay a little. I believe in God. He has had a hand in my life.

BT: What about yourself are you most proud?

FJ: Well I would have to say . . . that I learned to be who I am. I learned to stand up for what I believe, as my daddy did. You can't buy respect. You have to earn it. Don't give me anything I don't earn.

BT: Thank you so much for giving me this time.

FJ: I appreciate you for doing this.

[A big hug sealed the deal.]

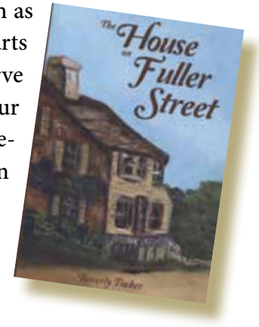
Illustrations

Lylburn Downing School and historical plaque: Lexington City Public Schools

Portrait of Sonny Jones: Bruce Macdonald

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)