



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



Project Name: *Alexandria Legacies*

Title: *Interview with Elsie Thomas*

Date of Interview: *April 21, 2002*

Location of Interview: *Alexandria, Virginia*

Interviewer: *Unknown*

Transcriber: *Valerie Davison*

Abstract: Elsie Virginia Tucker Thomas was born in 1919 in Alexandria. She lived on Queen Street between North Patrick and North Alfred, and she talks about what the neighborhood was like. She also talks about the church she attended with her family. She went to school in Alexandria and graduated from Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. She also followed her mother's path and attended Virginia State College while her brothers went to Howard University. She supported her brothers in their work for civil rights; they protested the exclusion of African Americans from the Alexandria public library as early as 1939. Her father was among the citizens who supported the establishment of Hopkins House as a community center for young African Americans in 1939. This is the first of two interviews conducted with Mrs. Thomas; the second interview occurred in December 2006.

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Introductions	
Interviewer:	Good afternoon, Mrs. Thomas.
Elsie Thomas:	Good afternoon.
Interviewer:	Will you please give us your complete name?
Elsie Thomas:	My name is Elsie Virginia Tucker Thomas.
Interviewer:	And your date of birth, please?
Elsie Thomas:	December 5, 1919.
Interviewer:	All right. Can you give us your place of birth?
Elsie Thomas:	916 Queen Street, Alexandria, Virginia.
Background	
Interviewer:	We'd like to know a little bit about your growing up in Alexandria. Tell me, first, about your parents. Can you give me their names?
Elsie Thomas:	My father's name was Samuel A. Tucker, Jr. My mother's name was Fanny L. Williams Tucker.
Interviewer:	Who lived in your household, other than your parents and yourself?
Elsie Thomas:	My brothers, George, Wilbur (or Samuel Wilbur), and [unintelligible] Tucker.
Interviewer:	So there were three sons, and you were the only daughter.
Elsie Thomas:	Yes.
Interviewer:	Can you describe your family life in Alexandria? What was living like in your home, with your parents?
Elsie Thomas:	My parents always made sure that we did go to church; that we did go to school; that we did respect our seniors; and that we lived the kind of life that anyone could be proud of.
Neighborhood	
Interviewer:	Can you describe your neighborhood? The neighborhood where you grew up?
Elsie Thomas:	The neighborhood I grew up in was a mixed neighborhood. There were some Negroes and there were some whites, and they lived next door to each other. Then, at the corner, there was a drugstore, and they were just like part of the family, in that they talked to us. I can remember when my mother was very sick, that Mrs. Duncan would come and bring food, or find out if there was anything she could do to help. Mrs. Duncan had also grown up on the same block as my father had, when they were children.

Interviewer:	Do you remember any of the neighbors who lived near you?
Elsie Thomas:	Yes. Next to Mrs. Duncan's was Mr. Will Jackson and his family. The next house was Mrs. Isabel Williams and her family, because when I was born Mr. Amos Williams, I think, had died. I can only remember her and her children.
Interviewer:	Who were some of your playmates as you were growing up?
Elsie Thomas:	I didn't have a lot of playmates, but they were also my schoolmates. One of my playmates, whom I had known from church, even, was Marian Stanton, Marian Jackson Stanton, and Nettie Hearst were the two girls I played with. Colta Mae Willis, sometimes, if we all got together. Maude [unintelligible]. And I can't remember her married name either.
Interviewer:	What games did you play?
Elsie Thomas:	The games that we played was baseball, kickball, ring-around-the-rosie. Usually, games that little children do.
Interviewer:	When you describe your neighborhood, how do you describe it? How do you describe the neighbors, and the neighborhood? What was it like living in this neighborhood?
Elsie Thomas:	When I grew up, we all played together. There was no segregation, except on Sundays. Because the white kids went to the white churches, and we went to the black churches. Other than that, all of us played together, and like when I was playing hide-and-go-seek, when I was very little, I was hiding, but I somehow found my way to King Street. And as I was walking down King Street, Doug Duncan saw me, took me by the hand, and brought me home.
Interviewer:	So there was...
Elsie Thomas:	There was a certain communication between us, and it seemed that there was a certain love or interest in all of us, as neighbors, to one another.
Interviewer:	Now, as your family worshiped...and where did you worship?
Elsie Thomas:	We worshiped at Zion Baptist Church. My father had gone to that church ever since he was a little kid, because my grandmother and grandfather belonged to it. They lived, at that time, one door and a vacant lot from the church. Their address was 702 South Lee Street.
Interviewer:	What are some of your most vivid memories about the church?
Church	
Elsie Thomas:	My most vivid memories were of the plays we used to have. My father used to have a play or two that he had, but one that I remember, except for the Christmas plays, or the Easter plays, or the Children's Day plays, were the new minister, near the cross. I was in

	one of those plays with the new minister. They used to give them every year at certain churches.
Interviewer:	Did you attend Sunday School as a child?
Elsie Thomas:	I attended Sunday School, and I attended church, and it was a must at my house; no one stayed home on Sunday.
Interviewer:	Tell me about the worship service.
Elsie Thomas:	The worship service was like most worship service. You had the choir, and the minister, and the deacons, and the trustees, and the different members of the church. They were very congenial, [unintelligible], very friendly people.
Interviewer:	What time did you usually go to church, and what time did you get out of church?
Elsie Thomas:	It all depended on what minister was preaching, as to what time we would get out. With Reverend Butts, we would usually get out about 1:00, and he was our minister until Reverend Thomas became our minister. So all of my childhood, Reverend Butts was our pastor.
Interviewer:	Do you have any memories of the Revival?
Elsie Thomas:	Yes. I went to [unintelligible] and everything (it was at the church), because I had to go with my parents. The church was part of our life.
Schools	
Interviewer:	Tell me about the schools that you attended here in Alexandria.
Elsie Thomas:	I attended Parker-Gray School. It was the only black school in Alexandria at that time. My father's [unintelligible] had also attended Parker-Gray. Before that, my other brothers attended an all-boys' school that was down on South Washington Street, near the Catholic graveyard. Right now I can't remember its name.
Interviewer:	Was it the Snowden School?
Elsie Thomas:	That's right. Thank you.
Interviewer:	I've heard some other people mention the Snowden School.
Elsie Thomas:	I went to Parker-Gray every year through my eleventh grade. However, I also went to Dunbar in the summertime, for two or three years, before...the last year I went to Dunbar. That last year and a half I went to Dunbar, and I graduated from high school at Dunbar in 1937.
Interviewer:	Now why would you go to school in the summers, at Dunbar?
Elsie Thomas:	I didn't have anything else to do. My mother refused to let me work, under the conditions that you were...she wasn't too particular, and I don't feel like saying what it really was.

Interviewer:	So you graduated from Dunbar.
Elsie Thomas:	I graduated from Dunbar in 1938. You see what I have on my eyelids?
Interviewer:	Yes.
Elsie Thomas:	I started wearing them when I was at Dunbar. If you had anything that wasn't just right, they made you go and get it corrected. This is what they made me do, to get my glasses, until I finished Dunbar. I'm going to tell you the story about Mrs.—one of my teachers...
Interviewer:	I would love to hear the story.
Elsie Thomas:	...recognized my name, of Tucker. Not knowing that she had gone to school with my father, she asked me one day...she said, "Tucker, Tucker, Tucker." Then she asked me if I knew my father. Of course, I was worried whether they would put me out of school, and I didn't remember him. [Laughs] So she told me she would ask Susie Mann, when she went over there on Saturday. So I felt my goose was cooked, but it wasn't. [Laughs]
Interviewer:	Okay. So what kind of activities did you participate in, in high school?
Elsie Thomas:	Well, we had swimming, so I had to participate in athletics. But Mrs. [unintelligible] was the music teacher, and she was the dearest of ladies. I joined the Glee Club, and was very much interested in music at that time.
Interviewer:	So was this at Parker-Gray?
Elsie Thomas:	This was at Dunbar. I also belonged to...at Parker-Gray [unintelligible] Mrs. Sarah Mitford, when I was at Parker-Gray, my first years in high school.
Interviewer:	Now when you had the swimming at Dunbar, where did you...
Elsie Thomas:	...swim? At Dunbar. They had a pool at Dunbar High School, at First and [unintelligible] Street. All of us had to take it, as part of our physical education...swimming.
Interviewer:	Tell me about your education after high school.
Higher Education	
Elsie Thomas:	After high school, I continued to go to school. I went to a Virginia State College, simply because my mother had been at Virginia State. The boys were going to Howard, and I wanted to go to her school. So I registered, and went to Virginia State. I stayed there four years, but during the summer, again, I would go, sometimes, to Howard, to take subjects they didn't offer at Virginia State. So, there again, I spent most of my time traveling to and from school.

Interviewer:	And what did you study at Virginia State?
Elsie Thomas:	I studied history. That was my major. Also what you would call social studies, under Dr. Jackson, Luther P. Jackson.
Interviewer:	Do you have some very good memories of Virginia State?
Elsie Thomas:	Yes. I did. And I tried to be active in a number of things, a number of which I don't even remember anymore. But I sang in the chorus. I sang in the...they had a girls' Glee Club. I sang in that. Then they had the [unintelligible] Choir. I sang in that. I did my practice teaching at Daniel Webster School (I think it was called), which was on the campus. It was a high school. I can't remember my teacher's name, although she was from West Virginia and I knew her family by living in West Virginia for a time. And I can't remember her name.
The Great Depression and President Kennedy's Assassination	
Interviewer:	That's okay. There are periods in history where we always remember what we were doing when these events occurred. So I wanted to ask you about two of those. Can you tell me what you were doing, or what you remember about your life, during the Great Depression?
Elsie Thomas:	Do you know, during the Great Depression I was very young. [Laughs] I was...what? I started out...When I was two years old, it was the first of 1920. So you can remember that I must have been about nine or ten when that happened, and I don't remember anything about it.
Interviewer:	When do you remember about the time when President John Kennedy was assassinated?
Elsie Thomas:	I remember that I was working at [unintelligible], and I got a call from Alice Leonard, telling me, "Turn on the radio. They just shot President Kennedy." I turned on the radio, and as soon as the children heard, Hopkins House became empty, and we all went home. But the children left first, before we decided to close up.
Interviewer:	They just left and went home?
Elsie Thomas:	Yes.
Interviewer:	Now what was Hopkins House?
Hopkins House	
Elsie Thomas:	Back in my time, when I was a little girl, there was no recreation facilities except for the playground at Parker-Gray, which was [unintelligible] the black children to go. So different members of different churches and organizations decided they were going to have a community center. They did, and I can give you some of the names...Mr. Richard Poole; my father; Lawrence Day; Mr. Harris, Dr. Harris, who was a dentist, and he was from Fredericksburg. He was

	<p>on there; Mrs. Atkins, and Mr. Lorimore. Now I may not be able to give you all of them.</p> <p>Anyway, they made up the board of directors of Hopkins House. And I think I gave you my father's name. They decided that it would be a place where the children could go and be taught various things to do; or the plays that they presented at least once or twice a year. We took them to various places, because...I had never taken the children to the White House. A week or so before Kennedy died...and we also went someplace in Maryland with, I think it was, Johnson's children, two girls.</p> <p>So it was always that type of activity that we could go to. The children would also work with other groups in town. So they really had many activities to participate in, including what we were teaching them.</p>
Interviewer:	The Hopkins House is still in existence?
Elsie Thomas:	Yes.
Interviewer:	It's still a social service agency for the city?
Elsie Thomas:	Yes.
Interviewer:	Tell me what your involvement was in the Civil Rights Movement.
Civil Rights	
Elsie Thomas:	Civil Rights. [unintelligible] All I can say is whatever my brothers were interested in doing, I was with them.
Interviewer:	Tell me what your brothers were doing.
Elsie Thomas:	For instance, we did not have a black library. That was one of the first instances. My brothers, along with some of their friends, decided they were going to integrate the white library. That was in 1939. They had a sit-in, the first sit-in I ever knew anything about. They were arrested. And the brother who was then a lawyer, [unintelligible] W., defended them. The case has never been decided.
Interviewer:	It hasn't?
Elsie Thomas:	They were not arrested. I mean, they were arrested but they were not..what is the word I want to say?
Interviewer:	Were they charged?
Elsie Thomas:	No.
Interviewer:	They were never charged.
Elsie Thomas:	They went to court. I guess they were charged, but they weren't sentenced to anything. That's the word I wanted to use.
Interviewer:	Well, that's interesting, isn't it?

Elsie Thomas:	Of course, the interesting thing was that when the police came to arrest them, Bobby Strange was on the outside (he was the youngest one), and it was his job to run back to the office, to let Sammy [unintelligible] know that they had been arrested. So if you want to say “What part did I...?” It wasn’t me, it was my brothers.
Interviewer:	You supported them.
Elsie Thomas:	I supported them. Part of what went on...I was back in school [unintelligible] the hearing of the case. I had to go back to Virginia State before it all came out.
Career	
Interviewer:	Okay. Tell me about your career, when you started to work.
Elsie Thomas:	I did not work my first years out of school. I did substitute here in Alexandria, but somehow none of that...I didn’t have a job right away, so I worked with my father in his real estate and insurance office for a while, and substituted in the school system in Alexandria, when they needed a substitute. That’s what I really did when I first came out of school. I think the first school job I had was in a one-room school in [unintelligible] County, Virginia. I have the picture, if you can wait.
Interviewer:	Oh, we can wait. Don’t rush. I’m going to turn this off. Take your time. [Interruption] [No further conversation recorded.]