

INTERVIEWER: My name is Linda Simmons Henry. I'm currently at the home of Mrs. Annie B. Gibbs at 210 South Front Street, New Bern, North Carolina. We're here today on her porch and we're going to be talking about a series of topics as they relate to the African American presence in New Bern, North Carolina, and the contributions that the residents of this city have made.

First of all, Mrs. Gibbs, I would like for you to state your name and tell us a little bit about yourself.

MRS. GIBBS: My name is Annie B. Gibbs. I am a divorcee. My married name was Nixon. So, I'm going to tell Linda about who my husband was. He was Leon Clyde Nixon, very active during integration but I was only married 10 years and then I took my maiden name, which was Gibbs. I was not really born in New Bern. My parents moved here when I was a baby. Actually, I was born in Pollocksville. I don't remember that. I can tell you I received my formal education in New Bern. I also taught in the Craven County schools.

When I was in school, Professor was principal of the elementary school and F.R. Danyus was principal of the high school. When I finished high school, I really did not have any idea that I would go to college. But after talking with Mr. Danyus, he said that he thought that I could go even though I didn't have the money, and that I should talk with Mr. Barber. Mr. Barber had seen my high school record. I finished as Salutatorian of my class. Mr. Barber said that I did not need money. He would recommend that I go to college on a working scholarship. I was small at that time. I only weighed 98 pounds. He didn't suggest that I go to any of the schools close to New Bern. He thought they were too low. I should go to Winston-Salem. All I needed was my fare there. When I got there, I would follow his instructions. I would go to the office and tell them that I didn't have money; that I wanted a working scholarship. So I did finish; I finished with honors. My first job was in the dining room and after they noticed that I had abilities, I went to the infirmary where I gave out medicines to students. Then I went to the library and worked my Junior and Senior years. I came back to New Bern. Mr. Danyus was principal and I applied for work. As a result of Mr. Danyus' death, I was given the job at West Street school. That's where I started. Teachers at that time were just changed from one year to the next, to different schools. So I had an opportunity to work at Cove City, back to West Street, then to North Harlowe, and then to Craven Corner. Later, I came back to New Bern and I worked at Central School, a predominately white school. After they built J.T. Barber, they built H.J. McDonald. I went over there when it was first built and that's where I retired, after having taught 36 years in Craven County schools.

When I started working, teachers renewed their certificates every 5 years. You had to go to school to do this. So I had an opportunity to go to East Carolina. I also worked at Central in Durham. I worked at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I really like to say I got 6 credit hours from the University of New York. That was fantastic; a 6-hour course in child psychology.

I have other outstanding things that I would like to speak about. The first predominately white school in downtown New Bern, and from there I went to Tryon Palace and worked for 15 years as a guide and did all of the things that a guide would do there. I also was the first black woman to live in a house downtown historical New Bern. I wish I could go into more details. Perhaps Linda can come back another time and I'll be able to tell more about people who were outstanding in businesses. I remember about embalmers; I.P. Hatch was the first one in New Bern, then the Whitleys on Bern Street. Then it went from there to Oscars Mortuary. His daddy owned Godette Funeral Home which came before Oscars. Then it went from Oscars to Morgans. Mr. Morgan was Mr. Rivers' son-in-law. He was married to his only daughter, Barbara.

Most of the communities in New Bern would have had their own sweet stands, their own grocery stores. Duffyfield had shops. There was a Mr. Tillet who had a fruit stand. Mr. Tillet was black. Then there was Mr. Ralph Warrington who had a grocery store. He was white. He sold not only groceries, but meats. So you could really shop in Duffyfield if you had money. I only had a few pennies but I sifted sand to find them in Duffyfield. We were a poor family in Duffyfield. We rented from Mr. I.H. Smith who owned most of the homes in Duffyfield. I can remember when rent was \$.50 a week. We started off paying \$1.00 for rent, \$.75 for rent. Then we moved into a home for \$.50 a week. At that particular time, flour was 5cents a pound; sugar was 3 cents a pound. Coca-Colas were 5 cents. I came along during the Depression. I can remember when men didn't have work. They would stand on the corner just looking for work, or just waiting for someone to come by to give them a job. So I go way back. I didn't tell Linda I was 85 years old.

INTERVIEWER: You don't look like you're 85. You look so young.

MRS. GIBBS: Most people tell me that, so I feel proud of that; good living, Linda, and hard work. That's what I pass on to the children. Nothing is changed for children. I think children should be obedient first to God. They should read the bible, and do the commandments and do the ordinances that the bible tells them to do: first, obey your parents. Children should have study habits. That's what I tell my great grandsons. My oldest great grandson is 16 years old. I stress good study habits,

turning off the television. We didn't do too much television. We did read from the library, and that's where they should go, have good library habits. Read. Read anything, funny books, and not look at television all the time.

They should get involved in extracurricular activities. My grandsons do extracurricular activities. They do good sports. One is doing boxing right now. They love basketball and football and they are good at it. One is ambidextrous. I just love to see him shoot with both hands. They can shoot with the left hand, right hand. They can swim. They have a lot of wholesome sports that they enjoy.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me a little bit about West Street School, you going to elementary school at West Street, and some of the teachers that you admired while attending West Street.

MRS. GIBBS: Well, you wouldn't want names of the elementary teachers, but when I went to high school, I had Blanche Rivers. She's still alive. She's a centurion now. I had Mr. Robert Bolling (he was from New England – Boston), F. R. Danyus, Loretta Smith, Eva Adams, Ms. Carrie Fisher was outstanding. She taught home economics. She was instrumental in helping me through high school, giving me a job in the lunch room so that I could help to support my family. This is why my mother wanted me to stop in the 8th grade, to get a job and help my siblings. My mother had 7 children and I was the 4th child. I had a brother that died, and an older brother and sister. My sister left home at 13 and my brother left at 14 or 15, leaving me the oldest child there to help support the family. It's nice to have both parents, but you don't have to say "I didn't have a father and I didn't have a mother" and not be a success in life. I had neither. I had them but my daddy was a drunkard and my mother was depressed most of the time. She relied on me and my judgment before I was 12 years old. I was getting around relatives, getting that \$.50 to pay rent, getting odd jobs to feed them. I think I did quite well. I can boast today that I own two brick homes on the highway. I also have a trailer. I did all of this on a teacher's salary. I also have two Lincolns sitting in the driveway. I recently bought one. I have all of this. God has no respect of persons. I believe in God. If you obey and do what he tells you, you can be a success.

INTERVIEWER: How many children do you have?

MRS. GIBBS: I have two daughters. My oldest daughter was married to Ozie Faison. He just lost his life not too long ago. They had two children. I have two grandchildren by my oldest daughter. Her son is Ozie Faison, III, and the granddaughter is Tramell Ann Faison. She's got her Master's at Georgetown. She's a graduate of UNC. My daughter is an Aggie; she graduated from A & T. My younger

daughter went to A & T for 2 years, but she decided she could make more money with the Federal government. She has a job in DC making more money than any of us. My grandson is a graduate of Norfolk State. My younger grandson has his Masters from Norfolk State but he received his Bachelors from another school. All of my children and grandchildren have done well, been to college, even if they did not stay for four years.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the black businesses here in the New Bern area?

MRS. GIBBS: Well, really and truly, in my time, Five Points was important. When I went to Winston-Salem, there was a man who had passed through. He was a business manager there. But he remembered Five Points, because, in Five Points you had movies, grocery stores. I didn't even know about downtown New Bern until I was grown. I could buy anything you needed in Five Points: shoes, dresses. You could get your hair done. There were people who owned those places. There was a Mr. Hill who owned a drug store in Five Points.

INTERVIEWER: Was he an African-American?

MRS. GIBBS: Yes, he was. There was a Mr. Hargett who owned a fruit stand in Five Points. He was an African-American. There were barber shops and the barbers were black in Five Points. Anything that you needed, beauticians, etc. were in Five Points. The first one I knew about in New Bern was Mrs. Alfreda Stanley. They were the first blacks to live in downtown New Bern on New Street. There was George Downing in New Bern who had a beer garden, who could do a lot for us. Do you remember him?

INTERVIEWER: No. was Professor Barber?

MRS. GIBBS: Right across from him was another lady who had a café. I can't remember their names but I'll work on that so that if you come again, I will have the names.

INTERVIEWER: So Five Points was what you would call the Black Mecca?

MRS. GIBBS: That's true.

INTERVIEWER: So that different people coming in from the country could shop right there at Five Points.

MRS. GIBBS: That's true. If you wanted to buy a hat in New Bern, you would not want to come downtown to New Bern and put on a hood or something before you put the hat on. You could go to Five Points and try it on. You couldn't go downtown in New Bern and try on shoes without a stocking, but you could in Five Points. So there was really no reason for blacks to come downtown. I could have been one of the persons who remembered when Tryon Palace was rebuilt, but I didn't come downtown. It stayed in ruins for years and years, but I didn't come downtown. So when Tryon Palace was built (that was the only palace I know; the first one was destroyed by fire as I recall), I could have seen all of that, but I didn't come downtown. I had no reason to come. You needed money but most of the people in Duffyfield didn't have money.

INTERVIEWER: Describe the community in Duffyfield.

MRS. GIBBS: Duffyfield was like a wilderness. All of the times that I went up the streets in Duffyfield after I came from school, I would think I was Pocahontas. I imagined I could look and see Indians coming from behind trees. It was called Duffyfield because it was a field. There was nothing there but sand. In the summer, when we walked, our feet went all the way down into the hot sand. It's different today. Duffyfield looks like every other section of New Bern. You've got Duffyfield, you've got Locksfield, you've got Sunnyside. You've got all of those communities. But Duffyfield was the poorest. We just didn't have any money. But there were one or two blacks in Duffyfield who seemed to be good livers. They were not educated. They sold liquor, "White Lightnin".

INTERVIEWER: They called it "White Lightnin"?

MRS. GIBBS: That's what it was called then, "White Lightnin". There were barbershops where you would see men playing checkers, playing cards, because there was nothing to do. Most of the men, to get food, would fish around the waters and catch fish. Ours were mainly catfish. I knew about catfish long before I went to Texas. I went into a café in Texas and they were selling catfish on the menu. I ordered catfish and someone wanted to know if I knew what it tasted like. They stewed them. We fried them. So I learned all. I compared it to all of my teachings that I learned in Duffyfield. People hunted animals. They shunned possum. They would hunt fox, squirrels, or rabbits. That was their meat. Then we would eat fruit: plum trees, blackberries, blueberries, catberries. All of this grew in Duffyfield. Women would cook them, make pastries to go with them and this is the way we lived. We just survived. It's not like that now. Most of the homes, there had to be some historical homes in Duffyfield because after I came down in this area to work, I saw columns, pretty columns, and bay windows. I remember there were homes in

Duffyfield that looked like that. But those homes have been destroyed. Now when you review Carrie Godette, she is not a product of Duffyfield. She lived across Main Street, then you had Pavietown. Then there is Five Points.

INTERVIEWER: And you consider this area here to be a historic district. Are you the only African-American that lives in this area?

MRS. GIBBS: I am the only woman. There was a man who lived (he died) who lived on East Front Street. He was divorced. Do you remember Harriet Wade? She was a beautician. This was Harriet's house, right here on this corner. Harriett's home is not historical. It has to be so many years. This house was built in 1920. I had no problem getting this shield. Unless she got one yesterday, she does not have one. A lot of people say Harriet lived here before me; however, the point is when the house was built, so she does not live in a historical home.

INTERVIEWER: Were you here when this house was built?

MRS. GIBBS: No, I was not born. This house was built in 1920. I was born in 1923. This is a historical home. There are certain things that I could have done but I would have to get permission from the city, such as to change the color of the house, to change other features of the house, that would make it not historical. If you ask permission, they will say no. I recently had a new roof put on my house. I had to get permission to change things

INTERVIEWER: What was your social life like, the military, by New Bern being a military town as well as a town right on the coast where the Neuse River is.

MRS. GIBBS: It wasn't always military. I was living on Middle Street. We moved from Duffyfield. I was living on Middle Street during World War II. That is something I will always remember. I had never seen men drafted, but they drafted men through the school. We were out of school that day and men were lined up all the way down West Street to West Street School. If a boy was a senior during that draft, as soon as he graduated he became a part of that service. It made New Bern come alive, because it was between Cherry Point and Jacksonville. It was a pitiful situation. I have never felt so sorry for men in my life. Five Points, which was the hub of New Bern, they just lined up and just walked and wandered and acted like they didn't know where to go. On their days off, they would come in Five Points. I had a sister who would take 5 or 6 of them home and let them sit on the porch. We couldn't feed them but we could entertain them. Pearlie Mae Martin would get seniors, juniors, to get on buses and go to these bases and entertain them. I did a little

of that before going to college. Basically, the entertainment that I had when I was growing up was theatre. That's just about all.

INTERVIEWER: What was the name of the theatre?

MRS. GIBBS: The Masonic Theatre, right here in Five Points. There was another theatre that we could attend, for a while. We had been upstairs, we couldn't go downstairs. It was a white theatre. I was told that blacks would go up there and throw popcorn and trash on their heads, so they finally stopped that. When I finally did go downtown, I knew they had lunch counters but we were not allowed to buy or eat at the counters. That went on until the sixties. My ex-husband, Buckshot, was instrumental in having marches.

INTERVIEWER: Marches?

MRS. GIBBS: Yes, we marched.

INTERVIEWER: Buckshot Nixon? I thought you said his name was Clyde.

MRS. GIBBS: I didn't call his name, but that was his name, his middle name. His name was Leon Clyde Nixon. We were married 10 years. The man was great. He was well-known in New Bern. Anywhere you go, you're going to hear about "Buckshot Clyde Nixon." He brought about a lot of things. He died recently and he had the biggest funeral. He marched with Martin Luther King and all of those outstanding people.

INTERVIEWER: He did?

MRS. GIBBS: Yes, he did, and I wish I could find a program.

INTERVIEWER: What year did he die?

MRS. GIBBS: He's been dead about 5 years, I would say.

INTERVIEWER: Did he have some of the marches here?

MRS. GIBBS: All of them; he was arrested. He did all the things; he came up under Martin Luther King. He marched with him in Alabama. He used college students to help the demonstrations here in New Bern because he had two daughters. And he used his own daughters and they were my daughters. I was afraid for them out there marching with him. He was jailed many times, too.

INTERVIEWER: Was he a part of the sit-in down on Clinton?

MRS. GIBBS: Yes he was. I don't know if you remember Frank Pollock. He marched in front of him because he called him "Uncle Tom." He had a group out there in front of his store, because he was supposed to be selling his better boots to whites. He didn't care who you were. He did it in front of Rivers.

INTERVIEWER: Rivers Funeral Home?

MRS. GIBBS: Yes, he was noted in New Bern. He was noted for bringing equal rights to blacks. He did a wonderful job. But he was a sorry husband and a sorry father. I give him credit for that.

INTERVIEWER: Did he go to college?

MRS. GIBBS: He did not. I was at the church once when my younger daughter, which was my daughter, introduced him. I can remember some of the things she said about him, that he was not a college graduate. He graduated from the school of hard knocks. She went on to say the nicknames that they called him. Some called him "Buckshot", "Leon", "Clyde", "Leon Clyde Nixon". But I call him daddy. I had a little respect for him then. She made him sound like somebody.

INTERVIEWER: He was the one who started the NAACP here, wasn't he?

MRS. GIBBS: Yes, he supported it. But, I can remember before he got into it that Robert Whitehead was the first one. Buck was president of that for a while. I think they served for 2 years and it rotated.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you a little about the church. You were a member early in Duffyfield. What church were you a member of and then coming on to Tabernacle Church which is a white church

MRS. GIBBS: I confessed religion when I was 12 years old. The little country church in Duffyfield was like the one-room school. They were small. When that happened to me, I did join Star of Zion church.

INTERVIEWER: Star of Zion?

MRS. GIBBS: Yes, it was across Main Street. Duffyfield ended when you crossed Main Street. Main Street ran into West Street. You even had schools. You had the little Duffyfield school. It was called Sutton School. That's where Lee Morgan,

Rivers' son in-law. He was principal of that school. They still have that school now but they use it for Head Start.

INTERVIEWER: So, Lee Morgan later became the first black mayor of New Bern.

MRS. GIBBS: Yes. He was the first black mayor of New Bern. He died early. It was a sad death.

INTERVIEWER: Was Sutton School changed to Duffyfield Elementary School?

MRS. GIBBS: Yes. It was named after the Professor, Professor Sutton. I understand that this school used to be a formal school that graduates went to before going to college.

INTERVIEWER: It was a formal school? You mentioned Professor Sutton. What was his first name?

MRS. GIBBS: I don't remember his first name. I remember him. He was very old when I was a child. He was just called Professor Sutton. We called him that. What you need to find is a book put out by I.P. Hatch.

INTERVIEWER: I have it, the autobiography of I.P. Hatch.

MRS. GIBBS: You have it? Well it was a book that named everybody in New Bern. Even my name is in there. I don't know how he did it. I don't know what it's called. I do remember seeing this book. I didn't have time to read it. I saw it. I was looking through it. It had everybody's name in it, what they did, who you were, and who their parents were.

INTERVIEWER: It was a book by I.P. Hatch, that he wrote. I think he was a writer for the community.

MRS. GIBBS: Well, that's the book and you will find Mr. Sutton in it. I don't know his name. What I'm telling you, I wasn't taught. I just picked it up from conversations, from hearing older people talk. But I do remember the man, because his head was as white as cotton. I had to be 5 or 6 years old. When he'd come through Duffyfield, everybody respected him, Professor Sutton.

INTERVIEWER: Now, hearing this is a new name. Was it about the time Professor Barber was on the same here?

MRS. GIBBS: He was much older than Professor Barber.

INTERVIEWER: He was before Professor Barber?

MRS. GIBBS: Yes. Now, there is another girl that lives in Harlowe whose cousin, Matilda Mae Phillip, (she's prominent down there in Harlowe) because she was principal down there at that school.

INTERVIEWER: Phillip.

MRS. GIBBS: Phillip now, but she was a Godette. That name is important down there in that area, Godette. She married a Phillip and she was a principal at the school where I worked before coming here. They shifted us around, teachers at that time. You didn't stay one school too long. If you had skills that another school could use, they got benefit of what you knew too, because they would switch you around. I happened to work on that end. Back then, teachers were everything. I did drama, glee club, and I hadn't been taught all this stuff. They just assumed you could do it. T.C. taught us. We had music appreciation. We had to sing, we had to pretend we had classes. We would teach dances. It came in handy when I got my first job. May Days were important and you had to do dances in school, you did plays and all of that.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the big events in New Bern that most blacks looked forward to, like you were saying, the May Day?

MRS. GIBBS: The Prom, Junior-Senior Prom. If you were in the rural areas, you had plays, glee club, singings, field days, and that type of thing.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the African-American organizations that were here during the time that you were growing up? I've heard of the Climbers Club was in existence during those times and consisted of teachers, and the Rollettes, any kind of organizations.

MRS. GIBBS: I was a member of that. I was initiated for the Cosmetology Club. They don't have that; my daughters were members of the AKA and my granddaughter. Mark Faison I think was the founder of that. That was my granddaughter's paternal grandmother.

INTERVIEWER: What about some of the elected officials during that time?

MRS. GIBBS: We didn't get into that in my day. You wouldn't, like Barbara Lee, the Alderman. You wouldn't have people downtown working in that. Those were some of the achievements of later years.

INTERVIEWER: Who were some of the black doctors here?

MRS. GIBBS: I'd love to tell you about black doctors. Well, you know, Mrs. Beatrice Dudley was the first school nurse I've heard of.

INTERVIEWER: I remember her.

MRS. GIBBS: She went way back. She was about retired when you came along. Mrs. Dudley stayed in the system a long time as school nurse. She was from James City. I can tell you Dr. Fisher, (Carrie Fisher, home economics teacher, was his wife), Dr. Martin, Dr. Mann (he had a son, Bobby Mann, who played professional football), Dr. Mumford, and Dr. Daves was a black dentist. Dr. Bryant was a dentist. He was young. Dr. Mann was the first one that I remember. His wife was supervisor of Craven County Schools.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember Charlotte Rome? Charlotte Rome worked for the social services department.

MRS. GIBBS: But she wasn't a nurse. She handed out clothes and she was the welfare lady. That's what we called her.

INTERVIEWER: And about West Street ... Good Shepard Hospital ...

MRS. GIBBS: Dr. Johnson, (R.I.) comes to mind. He was the preacher down at the Episcopal Church.

INTERVIEWER: St. Cyprians. So he was very instrumental in getting Good Shepard built for African-Americans?

MRS. GIBBS: That's right. I can remember when that wasn't there either. I can remember when blacks went to St. Luke.

INTERVIEWER: To St. Luke's Hospital?

MRS. GIBBS: Yes, the basement of St. Luke's. I came along at that time and I should have been hospitalized but my parents couldn't afford it. They were just going to let me die, but Good took over. I had Rheumatic Fever. I was 8 years old. I didn't go to the hospital.

INTERVIEWER: Who were some of the midwives here at that time?

MRS. GIBBS: I can't remember their names. I didn't know who she was. I knew that when she came, the babies came. There was one lady in Duffyfield who did it all.

INTERVIEWER: New Bern is getting ready to celebrate it's 300th year. What is some of the historical contribution that you think should stand out as it relates to African-Americans for celebration?

MRS. GIBBS: They would go back to Tryon Palace. Caleb who founded Pepsi Cola. The drug store on Middle Street and Pollock Street. the drug store that he invented has been revitalized. Some of the churches will be included: First Baptist Church (Harry Truman visited this church). I was standing on the highway when he came from Cherry Point.

INTERVIEWER: He visited a black church?

MRS. GIBBS: That's not a black church; that's a white church. I would imagine

INTERVIEWER: This is such a historical area, to be right across the street from the Convention Center.

MRS. GIBBS: Yes, I can come right out in the morning and get the paper and the lot is empty. I can come back in an hour and the traffic is heavy. A whole lot of things go on over there. They park in front of the drive. The Marines use it a lot for balls. I can tell that because they are all dressed with their ladies with their pretty dresses.

INTERVIEWER: Ms. Gibbs, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for allowing me to come and interview you for this special project: "*Voices of the Neuse.*"

This ends the interview.