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SAVANNAH STATE UNIVERSITY

AN INTERVIEW WITH OTIS HAYWARD  
FOR THE  
GEORGIA BLACK FISHERMEN

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY  
DR. DIONNE HOSKINS

SAVANNAH, GEORGIA  
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**Interviewee:** Mr. Otis Hayward

**Interviewer:** Dr. Dionne Hoskins

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**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Dionne Hoskins

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**Abstract:**

Otis Hayward comes from a long line of independent, nomadic commercial fishermen on both sides of his family. In his teenage years, he worked as a striker on his father's boat and traveled far from his small hometown of Thunderbolt, Georgia—five miles southeast of Savannah, in Chatham County—to follow seasonally migrating shrimp along Florida's Atlantic coastline. Mr. Hayward was encouraged by his father to leave the fishing industry so he attended Hampton University (formerly Hampton Institute) on a partial scholarship, but enlisted in the military prior to completing his degree. While in the military he was a counter intelligence agent, which took him throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe. After leaving the military, Mr. Hayward returned to Savannah and completed multiple degrees, through the G.I. Bill, and over the span of his career worked as an engineer, fireman, lawyer, and councilmen, to improve his community and remove injustices through his leadership.

Mr. Hayward recalls his early years working as a striker on his father's boat and the shrimping knowledge passed down to him while fishing off the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida Keys, and the Yucatan Peninsula, in Mexico. Mr. Hayward recalls spending his summers observing the differences between his matriarchal grandparents' commercially fishing practices compared to his patriarchal family's business. The hard life of a shrimper, led to many African Americans departing the industry quickly or discouraging their children from pursuing the dangerous career. Significant contributions from both sides of Mr. Hayward's family, have left a lasting imprint in history and Savannah. His patriarchal great-grandfather, Abraham Hayward, was a former enslaved person who fought in the Civil War for South Carolina's first colored regiment. As well as, his grandfather Prince Hayward who was a well-educated math teacher in Savannah, who helped establish the International Longshoreman's Association. Mr. Hayward attests that his formative years in the fishing industry and the guidance and legacy of his family allowed him to achieve a better life and enhance other African Americans' lives.

**Dionne Hoskins:** 00:01 Okay, we're recording. I'm here with Mr. Otis Hayward, who is a native of Savannah and who has long traced family history in Thunderbolt, Georgia and in the fishing industry and he's going to share some of that with us. Okay.

**Otis Hayward:** 00:21 Now, um, the thing that I want to share is primarily, you know, concerning my family. My father, Thomas Haywood was a commercial fisherman, and you know, this is a...

**DH:** 00:36 A homegoing program—obituary.

**OH:** 00:38 Right. This was his funeral that we had back in 1992. What it does is it you know—my brother Thomas Johnson was also a fisherman. A commercial fisherman and...

**DH:** 00:56 The College Park Church. This is in Thunderbolt! This is right across from Savannah State. Yep, I have attended there!

**OH:** 01:02 That's where my father and a whole lot of the members of my family on the Butler side, that's where they went to church was at, was at Thunderbolt in College Park. And my aunt Miss Lilly Mae Means, you know, who passed in 2008. Her husband was a commercial fisherman and they were both captains of, you know, commercial fishermen.

**DH:** 01:30 Of their own vessels and it's fascinating. What was their primary catch? Were they crabbers or shrimpers?

**OH:** 01:39 No, they were shrimpers. Yeah. All my, just about, all my family on my father's side was shrimpers. Now on my mother's side there were commercial fishermen that came out of East Savannah. Like my great grand-, not my great grandfather, but my grandfather. His name was Andrew Walker. Now, there was a difference in the way in which they fished, but before I get to him, let me show you. This is my um my brother, you know, that I mentioned earlier, Thomas Johnson; he was also a commercial fisherman.

**DH:** 02:19 Born in 1937. So he was a...he was a commercial fisherman? What in the 50s, 60s?

**OH:** 02:26 Yeah, well, he started in the 50s and the 60s, right. Now my father and my uncle, this uncle, you know, they were like back in the 40s, you know, and the 30s. You know, they were fishermen there in um...and the thing is that my uncle, we call him Eagle Eye. His real name was Gabriel, Gabriel Means. The thing was, he came out of Florida, and his home was in St. Augustine. So, they would um, you know, fish like between like South Carolina over where you would have—that was Hilton Head back then.

**DH:** 03:11 Back when Hilton Head was still Black?

**OH:** 03:13 Hilton Head was Black. I mean, the thing is, you didn't even have the bridge, a roadway that went over to to Hilton Head the way it is now. They would fish up out of a place they called Gaston Bank. You know, I mean from lets says Gaston Bank and over in South Carolina, they would go all the way down, you know, from Savannah, you know, down through St. Catharines, and Wassaw and on down past Brunswick, over past like Fernandina.

**DH:** Fernandina Beach!

**OH:** Fernandina Beach, that's right. Because that's where my uncle Gabriel Means came out of Fernandina Beach. That's where he was born and he like in later years relocated to St. Augustine, Florida and they would fish St Augustine down off Mackenzie off May Port down off what now is called Cape Canaveral. We just used to call it the cape back then. They would go all the way down to like Fort Pierce. All the way round past Miami down to Key West. Now Key West was a big fishing port. All right. That was where they went in the winter time because they would like follow the warm waters right and in the...in the winter time the waters got like, you know, too cold up in this area around here to fish that. So, they will go down off of Key West.

**DH:** 04:51 Now did they fish and sell their catch down there? Did they stay? Did they go down there, fish, sell their catch, and come back with an empty vessel or were they going up and down the coast?

**OH:** 05:02 Oh no! They...they—it was like a seasonal type thing. And what would happen is when the season was over here, you know, then they would go down the coast, fish all the way down the coast until they got the Key West. Now, they would... (phone rings). Can you hold your [interview]...?

**DH:** 05:20 Certainly.  
[Interview paused]

**DH:** 00:01 Okay, we're recording. So, you were telling me that it was a seasonal thing that they would go down to Key West?

**OH:** 00:05 That's right. They would, you know like I said, they would fish all the way down the coast until they got the Key West. And like, what would happen is that was one of the...the major areas for a concentration for fishing they would fish off um... There was placed on it called Dry Tortugas in fact, that has very historical significance. Because that's where they held Jeff Davis, you know, after the Civil War with the Confederacy. Yeah. And, um...

**DH:** 00:42 See I know it as a protected area now. Yeah.

**OH:** 00:45 Well, that was one of the areas that would fish down around there. Um, then at another time, they would like go over to a place called Fort Myers and off of Sanibel Island, and that area down in there; off of Punta Gorda and that area and they would fish over there. Then it got to a point where they discovered new fishing grounds out off a place called Campeche on the Yucatan Peninsula, in Mexico.

**DH:** Really?

**OH:** Really, and what they would do then is that like they would leave out of Fort Myers, which is where my father fished out of when they were going over to the Yucatan peninsula; which is when I got an opportunity and a chance to, you know, to go fishing in Mexico. Because when I was around 12, (humph) we were fishing out of...out of St. Augustine and we used to come out of St. Augustine on what was then called the San Sebastian River and we would enter into like the...the Atlantic Ocean and we would fish up and down like from like Daytona, around Tansy up to May Port.

**DH:** 01:19 Really? This is fascinating. This is you, your dad, and your brother?

**OH:** 02:02 Well, my brother—yeah (he) would be with us sometimes. What happened at other times, you know, he would be a striker on a different vessel, we were called.

**DH:** 02:10 You were a striker on a...? Okay. You were a striker?

**OH:** 02:12 We were called strikers, right. And he was like the captain. So, we would be strikers working for my father and there was a whole big turnover of...of people who were strikers. And that's how my father first started in...in shrimping, as a striker himself and he worked his way up to being a captain.

**DH:** 02:36 Now that—I'm seeing that as hard work. What exactly did you do as a striker? Were you pulling the nets? Were you doing whatever the captain says?

**OH:** 02:43 Whatever the captain says, but the thing is, what would happen is the nets were operated by...by machinery. You know, we used to call it the highster. All right, and when I first started working with my father, we had what they called single rigs. You know, you just had one net that would go out over the back of the boat.

**DH:** 03:11 Okay, not like the double nets we see now?

**OH:** 03:13 That's right. What we called a double nets, you just see and we used to call them double riggers. All right, were you'd have the two booms that would go outside and you would drop a net and doors off each one of them booms, but in order to drop 'em out, you know, they would come off the rigging which where the...the cables were attached. Now you had, like...How can I tell ya? They were like, metal cables. If you...if you ever went down to the boats, you'd see what they look like.

**DH:** 03:48 It's not rope. It's...it's not...yeah.

**OH:** 03:51 It's not rope, it's actually metal cable. Alright, but you did have ropes out on the on the wings where the nets were. Alright, because what would happen is we had a thing, it was a line. I can't remember the exact name for it now, but what happened with that line is you would you...would have a long pole with a hook on it and would go out and you catch the line. And you would pull a line in and you would go over to the highster and what that would do is it would, when you pulled your doors up, you know, the doors were what was used to spread the net. Because when net went down into the water, if it wasn't spread out and open, you weren't catching anything.

**DH:** 04:38 (In unison) You weren't catching anything!

**OH:** 04:40 There you go, you go it! Right. But anyway, the thing is that you would use that and you would pull up you wouldn't pull the whole net in. What you pull in would be the bag, where all the stuff that had gone into the mouth of the net would go down into the bag.

**DH:** 04:55 The cod end.

**OH:** 04:56 That's right! That's that's the cod end. That's that's the the end of the net where all the things that had come into the net would...

**DH:** 05:04 Would accumulate, okay.

**OH:** 05:06 Right, right. And then you would pull the bag in. So, you didn't have to pull the doors and and your nets and all your chains and stuff in at one time.

**DH:** 05:15 So, the striker, that was the entry level, your first job on the boat? It sounds like you're learning how to do everything.

**OH:** 05:22 Yeah, you learned how to do that, you know how to, you know, roll the wheel, or what we'd called steering the boat, but we call it rolling the wheel. Um, yeah, you learn how to

do that and you learn what the path and direction you had to do when you were doing the dragging. Dragging is what you actually doing when you had the nets out.

**DH:** 05:42 On the bottom?

**OH:** 05:45 On the bottom and pulling along the bottom to catch whatever was there that you were catching. And that's how you would um that's how you do the fishing. All right. And when you pulled the, the bag in, you know, we had like the highster and it would go up and you trip your bag. And when you trip the bag, all the things that had gone down into the you know...

**DH:** 05:45 Into the cod end.

**OH:** 05:45 That's right, it would fall out on the deck. Then what you have to do then as a striker (laughing) you know, you'd have to sift through all that that had come down on the net, you know, out of the net, to take the shrimp out or whatever type fish you were gonna take out all right.

**DH:** 06:31 But you must have seen, if you're on the bottom you must have seen flounder and?

**OH:** 06:34 Oh, we saw some everything.

**DH:** 06:36 Sea whips? and...

**OH:** 06:37 You saw, you saw what what they called squid, calamari now. You saw lobsters.

**DH:** 06:45 Wow!

**OH:** 06:46 When you were fishing, especially down off of the Florida Keys.

**DH:** 06:50 Oh, that makes sense.

**OH:** 06:51 You would get those those lobsters down there. And you would catch different things based upon the area that you were fishing in.

**DH:** 07:01 I see.

**OH:** 07:01 You know, um like up on this end, when I say this end I mean up around Savannah.

**DH:** 07:07 Savannah, Georgia?

**OH:** 07:08 Right, Georgia and off South Carolina we used to catch things like they were called whittings.

**DH:** 07:13 Yes.

**OH:** 07:14 Yeah. We'd catch them and those were the fish that we would save, you know, because we could sell that along with the shrimp. My father didn't deal with the crabs at all. He said they were too much of a nuisance.

**DH:** 07:29 Really?

**OH:** 07:29 Right. So, the crabs and stuff we threw back overboard, and other things like sponge and, you know, shell fish and stuff like that. We didn't keep that, you know? That was not...

**DH:** 07:44 Well, that wasn't saleable.

**OH:** 07:45 Marketable product. Right

**DH:** 07:47 Now with the...with the whiting. We're whiting as popular then as they are now? Like...

**OH:** 07:53 Oh yes!

**DH:** 07:53 My family is from Virginia and you know, we were spot and croaker people. And when I when we moved down here when I was a child, we were down here whiting was the way to go.

**OH:** 08:03 That's right, that's right.

**DH:** 08:04 And it's always been that way?

**OH:** 08:06 Yeah, but we, I mean, we would keep spots and um croakers because that was a seasonal type fish. You know.

**DH:** 08:14 Yes.

**OH:** 08:14 You didn't get croakers and spots the whole time. Alright. And we would see flounders, you know, but as I said, the crabs we did the only time we would keep crabs, if we wanted to keep 'em for ourselves, family and...



**DH:** 08:30 And want to take 'em home?

**OH:** 08:30 Right and want to take 'em home and, you know, you take them out there and you boil 'em and all that kind of stuff. Um, and that was another thing that that I used to talk to my father about. Because, you know, I was into the, the commercial side of the thing, I was about making the money. Okay (laughing). All right. And we used to give away a lot of seafood. You know, and, you know, I used to talk to my father about, "Hey, look, you know, we given away money here", you know, yeah, but, like when we get back to the dock, there'd be people that I knew who wanted to handle the fishing and the crabs and stuff like that, and we just give it away.

**DH:** 09:09 That's interesting you would say that because I have a friend who lives in in Sandfly. And his of his uncle is a Stiles and he said that his he said his uncle used to do the same thing that we know, whatever they had, they would drive through Pinpoint. Drive thru Sandfly and as a child, when he would come home in the summer, it would be nothing for them to drive around the neighborhood dropping off extra okra, extra squash, you know, extra fish, you know, among the community.

**OH:** 09:39 That was that was the way people lived back then, you know, they were, they were willing to share what they had, you know, like, like, you know. My wife is from Alabama and she came from a place called Barbara County, and her father was a farmer. And we just often joke about the thing that we farmed the sea and they farmed the land and the thing is that that's what he would do. You know, he would, he meaning my father-in-law, you know, his name was Eddie Fryer; he would plant additional acreage, you know, just to be able to give it to people. He wouldn't sell it.

**DH:** 09:39 He factored that in his business, right?

**OH:** 09:40 He factored that in, in this farming business.

**DH:** 10:00 Is that what your dad was? Do you do you think that was what your dad was doing at that point was, you know, estimating his catch for the people who were in need? Who would be at the dock?

**OH:** 10:36 That's right. I mean, the thing is that they were just benevolent people. Um, you know, as I said, I was more along your...

**DH:** 10:45 Entrepreneurial? (laughing)

**OH:** 10:46 That's right! I was about making money, you know, but um he said, "No, give it to 'em." You know and I said, "Well, you know, we lose the money?" But he said, "Naw, let 'em have it." See the thing is that, um, they believed that you get your blessing,

**DH:** 11:06 Yes!

**OH:** 11:07 You know, from giving to others. And that was the thing that that he would do.

**DH:** 11:13 It was a tithe of some sort.

**OH:** 11:14 That's right! It's just like, that's a good way of thinking about it. I didn't think about it exactly that way. But yeah, that's probably the way in which they conceived it. The thing is, here was your tithes that you were giving back, you know, um, but it was a very interesting life. I enjoyed it, but they didn't want me to be a fisherman. Because the fact was, they wanted me to go ahead and do something else in my life, because I was good with the books.

**DH:** 11:44 Really?

**OH:** 11:45 Yeah.

**DH:** 11:46 So, they...so they, they... pro, they actively said, you can join us now in your youth, but this is not going to be your career. What did they have in mind for you? What did you...What did your dad have in mind for you?

**OH:** 11:57 Well, he wanted me to go to college. And because of the fact. Oh, yeah, I went to law school. I've got, you know, a whole lot of degrees. But the thing is that, um, they thought that that was a good life for them. But they wanted something better for their children. Alright. And I mean, I was the only one of my brothers and sisters to go into college. But the fact was that he wanted something good for all of his kids. And that's part of what I did when, when he passed. Because as you can see here, I did a tribute to my father.

**DH:** 12:45 I see. I see (looking at paperwork).

**OH:** 12:48 Because he was a good man. He was a very good man.

**DH:** 12:51 He sounds like he was.

**OH:** 12:55 He was.

**DH:** 12:55 Sounds like he was a very independent man.

**OH:** 12:57 Oh, he was that! Well, I mean, that comes from a long line of things that, that we as Haywards were very independent people. And that goes even back to, you know, my, my great grandfather, who was a slave on the Haywood plantation over in, in Buford, South Carolina. And he was one of the people that I told you about that fought with the first South Carolina colored regiment of African descent.

**DH:** 13:29 Yes, yes. You mentioned that.

**OH:** 13:31 Right. And I think that's part of what happened with us being so independent minding and about the fact that, you know, they wanted us to go further, other than just being commercial fishermen because my, my grandfather, my father's father, his name was Prince Hayward, and he was a very entrepreneurial, I should say. Individual here in Savannah. Um...

**DH:** 14:07 What is it that he did?

**OH:** 14:08 Oh, good Lord. He did a lot of things. Some of it legal, some of it illegal, you know um, but he was a teacher, you know, he was a math teacher. He went to what was called Penn School.

**DH:** 14:23 Yes.

**OH:** 14:24 Over in um...

**DH:** 14:25 It's now the Penn Center. Right?

**OH:** 14:26 That's right! It was the Penn School back then. It was a school that was established right after and the Civil War, you know, in which it was a big thing back then, in so far as education was concerned, among Blacks, you know. If you saw the picture Glory, you saw how in that that movie, you know, Blacks had a great sense of responsibility toward learning. You know, the thing was that at that time Whites didn't want them to learn. You know, it was it was like a crime to teach Blacks to read and write.

**DH:** 15:11 I see.

**OH:** 15:12 Um, but he was able, he meaning my great grandfather Abraham Hayward, the one who fought in the civil war, with the first South Carolina colored regiment, which was later changed to be the US Colored Troops. That was like the 33rd regiment.

**DH:** 15:32 Yes.

**OH:** 15:32 In fact, the first South Carolina colored regiment of African descent was the first Black unit to be busted into the Union Army during the Civil War.

**DH:** Really?

**OH:** Right. I mean, it's, it's a whole long story. In fact, I did a documentary on it. Oh, right. But go ahead. What was your question?

**DH:** 15:57 Well, I'm thinking I'm listening, so you have this, this South Carolina, Georgia heritage and in a strong line of, of really strong father figures, you know, in your family. And you tell me that you're, you know, there was your...your father's wish that you not follow into...into fisheries. What was your—did your mother's family also have this similar strong background? Do you know as much about your mother's family?

**OH:** 16:29 Well, yeah, I know quite a bit about my mother's family as well. I come from very old Black Savannah family. Okay, right. Um, my mother's side of the family, were not as... How can tell you? They did not have the material things that my father's side of the family had. But they were very bright, intelligent people.

**DH:** 16:55 And that's not uncommon.

**OH:** 16:56 Yeah. All right. And the thing was that, um, as I said, my...my grandfather, on my mother's side, who was Andrew Walker senior, was a fisherman himself. Alright. They settled out and what we now, excuse me, what we now call East Savannah. Which is, you know, out on the East side of just that, Savannah. And they initially came from South Carolina, as well.

**DH:** 17:30 I see.

**OH:** 17:30 Alright. And what I believe in what I've been told, you know, is one of the reasons for him settling in that area was because of its proximity to...

**DH:** 17:45 The water?

**OH:** 17:45 The water! That's right, because they had creeks out there that ran into what we now call the, the Wilmington River.

**DH:** 17:54 Yes.

**OH:** 17:54 Back then they just used to call it the Thunderbolt River. All right. And, um, they had they fished by bateaus, you know, they had oh, these these row boats as people call 'em. Yeah. Well, they fish with bateaus and they also fished with cast nets.

**DH:** 18:07 Yes, yes.

**OH:** 18:14 They didn't have the big boats with the engines and stuff like that.

DH: Like your father had?

OH: Like my father had, right, but they would go out and they would fish for fish. And they would fish for crabs, and shrimp, you know, and they would bring it back and they would sell it. Because my grandmother, that's what she told me about what she would do. They had a thing where they would have a string of fish, the same things we call palm now that they have for Palm Sunday.

**DH:** 18:14 Yes.

**OH:** 18:14 And the stuff that they use, like for palmetto type tree.

DH: Yes!

OH: Well, they will take the leaves from that and they would string the fish on it.

DH: Really?

OH: Right. So, when they...when they brought the catch in, they will string the fish up, and they would go out and sell it in the community.

DH: On the palm frond?

OH: On the, on the palm. They will string it up on the palm leaves, you know.

DH: Fascinating.

OH: Right. And that's what they would call a "string of fish".

DH: (In unison) A string of fish!

OH: Right, right (laughing)! You know, they would sell the crabs and shrimp and stuff like that. So they were, that was a means of livelihood for them. They had the individual gardens and you know things like that in which they were able to sustain themselves and so far as is food was concerned. And that's one of the reasons why they would locate on you know, areas like East Savannah. Areas like Bonaventure. Areas like Thunderbolt. Areas like Pinpoint. You know, areas like Montgomery.

DH: Montgomery, yeah.

OH: Yeah, right. Our boroughs all those areas were like...

**DH:** 18:18 You mean boroughs way on the south side of Savannah?

**OH:** 20:13 No, not that boroughs.

DH: Okay.

OH: There was a borough out near White Bluff.

DH: Oh!

OH: There's an area out there called boroughs as well. Because you had a common thru way. I guess you could say the waterway itself was like the way our highways and roads are today for them. By means that a water in so far as the creeks you know the rivers and things like that.

**DH:** 20:39 So, they would visit and get around via the creeks, rather than via the roads?

**OH:** 20:44 That's right. That's exactly how they would, you know get to visit each other. I mean, they had like horse and buggies and stuff like that because they didn't have cars and automobiles. Back during the time that I'm talking about in so far as my, my grandparents and great grandparents are concerned. It was only when it got up to the times like when my my grandfather, um, the one that I talked about who went to the Penn School.

DH: Prince...?

OH: Prince Hayward, right. He, he was a very successful man. Because he, as I said, taught school after having having completed school at, um, at the Penn School, he came to Savannah, and his sister studied to be a nurse over there. And she left there and went to Jacksonville, because they actually homesteaded their property down in Jacksonville in Florida. She got

married down the and she was the nurse down there. And I used to go down there to her sometime in the summer. And that's how I found out about my great grandfather...

**DH:** 22:04 Abraham Hayward?

**OH:** (In unison) Abraham Hayward.

**DH:** I see. Now, I do have a question about your dad. Because it sounds like your experience is different than some people I've spoken to where at some point, they their family stopped fishing, and just stopped fishing. And it sounds like your father, you know, from the from the homegoing service or from how you describe it. Did he, did he fish his whole career until he retired?

**OH:** His whole life. That's right.

**DH:** Did he retire?

**OH:** 22:33 Well, he retired from from actually being a captain of the, of a boat. You know, I mean, he was, you know, up in age when that happened.

**DH:** But he continued to fish?

**OH:** Not only that, what he did was he continued to build nets. You know, he was great at not only fishing, but the repair of nets and the building of nets, you know, that they used to do the fishing? He continued to do that almost up until, you know, his health failed him.

**DH:** 23:05 Well, now that's very, it's very interesting, because there's this well, you know, we don't have as many African Americans in the commercial fishing industry in coastal Georgia as we used to.

**OH:** Oh, my God.

**DH:** And one of the things we want to know, one of the reasons behind this study is to find out why to talk to people who used to do it, and kind of get that answer. So, what was the historical role of African Americans in the fishing industry in Georgia? And what caused the change? Do you from your experience, I mean, we know part of the changes, your dad decided he didn't want it to go on another generation. What what other, what other things just from being a striker and being having the experience you that had and your family? What would you say might be some of the reasons that people around you didn't fish as long as your dad did?

**OH:** 23:54 Well, one of the, one of the reasons is also because of family connections, family ties. The thing is, a fisherman had to stay away from his family a lot. We would, we would be months without seeing my father. You know, we'd be long periods of times, when we would be here in Savannah. And my father would be down in Florida, over in Mexico, places like that. I think part of that was, you know, part of the reason then, that he didn't want me to come into it, because not only was it hard work, you know, but also it was the sense of the family being together.

DH: Okay.

OH: You know. Then he, for me, particularly, he felt that I had a better chance of doing other things because, you know, of my education. You know, I mean I finished 13th in a class and 360 from Anthony B. Chan School.

DH: That's extraordinary!

OH: You know, top boy in my class and got a scholarship, you know, to go to school. But it wasn't a full scholarship. So, my father had to supplement you know, the the additional amounts that were necessary for me to go to school. But I mean, going to a place like Hampton Institute where, okay, I went to Hampton and after Hampton, I went to the military and after the military, I came back and went to school again. And on my GI Bill, out at Armstrong. It was then called Armstrong State College.

DH: Yes!

OH: It wasn't Armstrong University.

DH: Armstrong Atlantic. Yeah.

OH: Right. Right.

**DH:** 25:49 And you did you get another degree? You got a graduate degree, or did you get another degree?

**OH:** 25:54 No, I got I got other degrees. I didn't complete Hampton. I went to my junior year in Hampton. So, when I came out of the military, and I worked, you know, before I decided I was gone go back to school.

DH: I see.



**OH:** Because I used to work for the Corps of Engineers in Brooklyn and Borough Hall. And then I worked in engineering at Pratt and Whitney, in Hartford, Connecticut, where I did, you know, layouts and engine designs and stuff like that for for jet engines. And I mean, I've had a very, very varied career, you know.

**DH:** Sounds fascinating.

**OH:** Yeah. Well, I used to work espionage, counter espionage, for the United States government when I was in the military, it was thing called the Army Security Agency in which we did espionage, counter espionage, for the United States. I did a lot of travel in Asia, Africa, and Europe. And my base operations at that time was in Asmara in Ethiopia. And from there, you know, I would go out into different places where they would give me assignments to go to.

**DH:** 27:10 So very far away from being a striker off the coast of Mexico.

**OH:** Oh, yes it was.

**DH:** That's very far...(laughing)

**OH:** 27:15 I mean, I've done a lot of things, you know. And the thing is that, I always go back to that, that original thing here in Savannah, and part of that had to do with my father, because if I hadn't had those kinds of experiences in life, I probably wouldn't have been thinking the way I think about things in life. And I probably wouldn't have gone ahead and been able to accomplish the things that I've done in life. Because I've been a politician, you know, um...

**DH:** 27:49 Tell me about your political career or the policies that you because that's, I think that's an important part of you may not have affected fisheries policy, but that's an important part of what happens in commercial fisheries. Is that the rules that politicians make. So what, what led you to be a politician? And what did you do?

**OH:** 28:08 Well, I think part of that goes back to like, I was an activist, back during the, like, during the 50s and the 60s. I mean, all the way up to I mean, you know, the political thing... I was like, with the NAACP Youth Corps here in Savannah when I was, you know, a teenager with Mr. W.W. Law and Miss Wright and Mr. Gene Gatson and all those people. And, um, that went with me from Savannah, when I went to Hampton.

**DH:** I see.

**OH:** And when I got the Hampton, I became involved in the sit in demonstrations and things like that back to in the 60s when, you know, they first started down and in Greensboro. I think it was

in North Carolina with the sit ins and moved I think over to Virginia union, which was over in, in Virginia, and then it came to us. I think we were like one of the third or the first few schools at Hampton to begin to participate in certain demonstrations. And, you know, that became a part of me because I thought about the injustices that were going on. Right. From that, you know, it just continued where I continued to see the injustices and I thought that they were wrong, and I would continue to fight. And like in 1970, when I was in Hartford, after I left Pratt and Whitney and the engineering for you, I went into the fire service, and I became a fireman. And, um, while I was there, we formed the International Association of Black professional firefighters. And I was instrumental, was one of the founders of that organization back in 1970, in Hartford, Connecticut. Right. And, you know, that's, you know, the political thing and me just kept growing.

**DH:** 30:16 I see. When did you run for? When did you run for public office? Were you in Connecticut then?

**OH:** 30:20 No, I didn't run for public office. Well, let me see, when I first ran for office. And I guess you could say it was a type of public office, they wouldn't. It was an elected an elected office when we had the Model Cities Program. Okay. All right. And we started out first with the neighborhood council, you know, and I became a vice chair to Savannah neighborhood council for a particular section, you know. They had like A, B and C and I lived in, in sub neighborhood B. And in, you know, we knew we had the election and I was elected then. And then when came the time for overall, like the president, the vice president, you know, for the overall Savannah Neighborhood Council, I ran for office for vice president and polled more, I polled more votes than the person who actually ran for president.

DH: Really?

OH: Yeah. Reverend Southall Brown, I think that was his name.

DH: Reverend Matthew Southall Brown?

OH: That's right. I polled more votes than he did. Well, people begin to take notice of me, then.

**DH:** 31:40 I see. All right, because he's been a figure, you know, he's over a large what had been over at that time, a large church.

**OH:** 31:46 ...a large congregation. Yeah. So, I polled more votes than he did.

**DH:** 31:50 So, people wanted to know who you were? Those who didn't know who you were.

**OH:** 31:55 People like Jean Gatson and others came to me and wanted me to run for state representative, you know, from from Chatham County for the state office in Atlanta.

DH: Really?

OH: Right. But I didn't want to do that because the person who was in that office, from that particular...

DH: From that district.

OH: District, right, was a friend of mine.

DH: I see.

OH: And I knew that what Jean and 'em were trying to do was to get him out of office. All right, so they were trying to use me and my popularity...

DH: As a pawn?

OH: As a pawn, to unseat him. So, you know, I didn't deal with it. But when I moved from Savannah, and went to Washington to work up there, after I graduated from Armstrong, you know, because Savannah just didn't have the kind of opportunities and vacancies in so far as employment is concerned, for a person who had gone through all that educational process to try and be able to move up and onward in life and so far as, you know, a job.

**DH:** 33:02 So, there's, there's there was a ceiling, then.

OH: That's right.

DH: Do you think that ceiling is still here now?

**OH:** 33:08 To some extent, yes. Because I have not seen...you I mean, you know, it's broken down somewhat, because you can see people who are in offices now who would not have been able to be in office that they were. Because I look at people like Bowles Ford when he got elected, you know. I've had two good friends of mine who have been mayors for the city of Savannah. Floyd Adams, who was, you know...

DH: He was our first African American Mayor.

OH: Otis Johnson, who, you know, now, were and still are close, you know, because when Otis and I helped to form the first chapter of Operation push for the state of Georgia. Right. And, you know, we went on and helped to form the one out there in Columbus, Georgia. Um, but anyway, the thing is that when I got ready to leave Savannah to go take the job in Washington, I was writing a column called "When Will We Learn" for the Savannah Herald. Right. And I didn't think that there was nobody else in Savannah, who had the guts to be able to continue the column in the vein in which I was writing it. And it was called "When Will We Learn", you know, and I would, you know, hit on a whole lot of topics and things that were, I felt beneficial to the Black community. So, Otis agreed to continue the column after I left, you know, and that also probably helped enable him to, to present issues to the community that you know, people took notice of him.

DH: I can see that happening.

OH: You know, right. But, um, when I left here and went to Washington, and and we lived in a predominantly White community called Mount Rainier. We just celebrated, we're celebrating right now the 100th anniversary and when we moved to Mount Rainier, Mount Rainier was only like 20%, you know, Afro Americans or Blacks at that time. And so, I would not have been able to run for office based solely upon the Black population.

DH: Right, I see.

OH: So, I had to form coalitions, you know, like, I had learned how to do that. Right, so anyway, um, what happened is with those coalitions and the Black vote, I ran for office in 1985 and was successful and became their first Black councilman. All right and I served two turns on city council. And they wanted me to run for mayor but my wife was not in agreement with that. And it just so happened that Governor Schafer, at that time, he was the governor for the state of Maryland, and I was very active in the, the Prince George's Municipal League and in the Maryland Municipal League, which were like leagues of cities, you know, that comprised the county and that comprised the state. Well, Governor Schaefer was making up an advisory board that consists of, you know, the municipalities and what he wanted to, to name it was the Governance Advisory Board for Justice Assistance for the state of Maryland. And being that I was working in the criminal justice system, you know, he put up two names and my name was one of them, and the other one was the chief of police for Havre de Grace in Maryland. And he selected me.

DH: That's extraordinary.

OH: Yeah. So that's how I got to be you know I mean, you know, you got people politicking and backing you and stuff like that.

**DH:** 37:10 Right. But but you've, you've demonstrated a record of service, right. So, it's so locally, you've you've come back home. How long have you been back in Savannah?

**OH:** 37:20 Oh, I've been back in Savannah now about three years. Yeah. Well, they wanted me to run for office when I came back, but you know, again, my wife was not for that she said that, you know, you given to the people all these years.

**DH:** It's time to...

**OH:** ...time, she said, it's time for me to have some of your time.

**DH:** 37:39 Well, we can't fault her for that (laughing).

**OH:** 37:42 Well, right. But I mean, you know, I still give back to the community even now because I'm on a board of directors over at St. Joseph's Candler with the smart senior's program. So that's me giving him back and I still give back like in my church at East Savannah. I belong to the First African Baptist Church in East Savannah, I serve with the Brotherhood out there.

**DH:** 38:08 And by contacting me and offering your time and giving you know, an hour of your time, you know, for an interview to share your family journey and the accomplishments of your father and your grandfather, your great grandfather, your mother's family, family in East Savannah. I mean I think that shows a continued track record of giving and supporting something I think people call a servant servant leadership.

**OH:** 38:31 Right. But you know, I don't want to leave out my my my mother's family in East Savannah which are the Walkers and the Bakers and the Greens and the Mitchell's you know.

**DH:** 38:45 The Bakers and Greens, now these...Are these, are the family members that you said used bateaus?

**OH:** Yeah, the Walkers, especially the Walkers.

**DH:** Especially. Okay, but also the Greens?

**OH:** 38:56 These are all, you know, people who are out in that area but you got to also think about um in Thunderbolt you had the Butlers you know, that was the side of my family from my grandmother's side. My my father's mother's side. In fact, they are big family in in in Thunderbolt even till today. Because they've got a street out there named...

DH: Butler Avenue?

OH: Yeah, that's it!

DH: I see. Yes.

OH: That that street, Butler Avenue is named for my family.

**DH:** 39:33 Extraordinary that I didn't know and I mean, I've ridden down Butler Avenue plenty of time.

**OH:** 39:37 Right. Right. Well, you know, that's, that's part of the legacy that my family left back here.

**DH:** 39:45 You know, you're saying that makes me curious about Thunderbolt. Now I remember reading "A Short History of Thunderbolt", where they talked about the seafood packing plants on River drive, and how it was mainly mainly the workers there were Blacks and White women. And that there were, I think, there were a couple of families, the Mangione's and some other families, but I don't get a lot of information of the Black families that were there or what it was like to be Black and Thunderbolt in this fishing town.

**OH:** 40:14 Well, the thing is, if you go back to that era. They want to say, from my understanding, that the fishing industry in Thunderbolt originated with Black people. All right, right down there where you see that big oak tree. I don't know if it's still there now or not, but there was a big oak tree down in Thunderbolt on River Street that they used to come into. You know, that was like, where, where the...

**DH:** 40:48 Where the restaurant was? I think they shut the restaurant down, but Palmer, the shipbuilders, just bought that corner. Down on the end of River Road was a big, big live oak tree.

**OH:** 40:58 No, this was I don't know, I don't know if you heard of the Savvies? Well see that there were, when it comes to commercial fishing in Thunderbolt you had, I think there's about three different families of Whites. All right. That, that were like in charge of the business when I was a kid growing up. You had the Ambrose. You had the Sisaronnies. And I can't remember Savvy's other names, I know that they were called Savvy. Um, because they had shrimp boats as well. Now, one group of Blacks that I didn't mention, and that was the Murrays. The Murrays, in fact you know, we we all grew up together especially Charles and James Murray. They, they became captains of shrimp boats. All right. I mean, they are like, during my generation. Because Charles and I went to the grammar school, junior high school, and high school together. And,

you know, they continued in the industry. In fact, I'm not sure, but if you get in touch with Charles or James, I think they still have boats.

DH: Wow!

OH: Down on... So, all of the...all the Blacks didn't leave the industry. You know, you still had some of them, just like Joe Williams, who just passed not long ago from from Sanford. You know, he remained in the industry, we were all part of the same generation. So, all the Blacks didn't leave the industry.

DH: Okay. Just some.

OH: Just some, I'll say the majority of them did. Right. But there were some who continued because it was a good, it was a good living, you know, it was very economically viable, um. It was a good place for people especially who didn't have a trade, you know. Who didn't have, you know, education. You know, because I can recall my father was making more money than then the people who had doctorates degrees teaching out in Savannah State.

**DH:** 43:27 Really?

OH: Yeah.

DH: Now, you know, that's also you know, the impression that you get about longshoreman as well.

OH: That's right, that's right.

DH: And so, where do you think people went? Did people leave fishing to go to longshoreman work or where did?

OH: No.

DH: What did you do when you stop being a fisherman?

**OH:** 43:42 There were two separate industries. Because my grandfather also was a longshoreman.

DH: Okay, this was Prince Hayward?

OH: Right. I mean, he was one of those individuals who helped organize the thing.

DH: Oh, the ILA—International Longshoreman’s Association? Okay.

OH: Right...well...umph...yeah. Yeah. I mean, you know, because when it comes to organizing Blacks, my family had on both sides of my family had a big thing to do with that. Because my uncle Ben out in East Savannah helped organize the um... What’s it called? The brotherhood of um...oh, good Lord. It was called the...um...Pullman Porters.

DH: Oh, okay. The Association of Pullman Porters.

OH: That’s right here. They were the ones who rode the train.

**DH:** 44:36 Yeah. One of the first Black unions.

**OH:** 44:38 That's right! That's right! That's right! One of the first Black unions, and he was back there with um...What's the man that’s given a whole lot of credit for organizing the Pullman Porters?

**DH:** 44:50 Oh, shoot. He's from Chicago, isn't he? I don't know.

**OH:** 44:53 I can't think of his name.

DH: I can't either (laughing).

OH: Yeah, my my, my uncle Ben worked with them in organizing the Pullman Porters the same way I worked later on with organizing the Black Fireman, here in this country.

**DH:** 45:07 So, so where did these people go? I mean, you you don't go from...if fishing is a good living, but for some reason you don't do it anymore. Where do you think these people went?

**OH:** 45:19 Well, some of them went through what we call having land jobs. You know, I can remember one of the captains, Grady, he went from doing fishing to working for the Savannah Morning News. You know, some people just died out. You know, they just died out. Because I remember um, good Lord. Fellow we used to call Scrap Yellow. I don't know that name.

DH: Scrap Yellow?

OH: Scrapy Yellow. Scrapy, Yellow. He was from East Savannah that that was, as I told you, the person who my father first went to work for Stryker. He taught my father the industry. He



taught him how to be a fisherman and how to go on to be a captain, um. He died; you know. So...

**DH:** 46:15 Now he wasn't a Green, Walker, Butler ,or Murray?

**OH:** 46:18 Not, not that I can recall. Now, he might have been been kin to some of the Walkers or some of you know, those people out in East Savannah. But I don't know exactly what his lineage is. All right.

DH: But he taught your dad?

OH: He taught my dad, right. Um, then you had, you know, people just died. I remember, like a man we used to call Lester Thorpe. That's another family you should be looking at two in out in Thunderbolt!

DH: Oh, wonderful.

OH: The Thorpes. The Thorpe's were also be in the fishing industry in so far as Blacks were concerned. When Mr. Lester, Captain Lester, he got killed in a boating accident where one of those big ships, one of those ships coming up the Savannah River, um, ran over their boat.

DH: Really?

OH: Yeah! And that was because the fact that you know, they were getting ready to go out to the fishing grounds because we would leave for the fishing grounds real early in the morning, you know. You'd get up like, four or five o'clock, to get to the boat, be able to take the boats out, so that by the time the sun came up, you are at the fishing grounds, getting your, your, your nets overboard. Because between the time you would leave Thunderbolt, until let's say you get out the Warsaw sound right. Off of Tybee, you know. You would be getting your nets prepared, you begin to chains laid out, right, you'll be getting you'll be getting your doors ready. So, when you got out to the fishing grounds, all you had to do is pull up doors out and let them into the water. So, what was happening is we used to sometime go into in the Savannah.

DH: The Savannah River?

OH: The Savannah River, and we would tie up down here behind what is now City Hall. Because there used to be a dock down there, long before they got...

DH: Got fancy (laughing).

OH: That's right.

**DH:** 48:29 So, you were in the front channel?

**OH:** 48:31 That's right, long before they got fancy with the plaza, you know, down there, and we would tie up down there. And what would happen is, you know, this particular time, they had gotten ready and they were coming out the channel. You know, Mr. Thorpe, I'm talking about...

DH: Capitan Thorpe, yeah.

OH: All right. And they were coming out the channel and he had gone the lay down and he gave the striker the wheel to come out. And you know, you had to be careful coming out of there. Because you had those jetties and all that stuff out there at the mouth of the river. And from what I've come to understand the striker wasn't as familiar with getting the boat out of the river as he should have been and because of that they got run over by...

**DH:** 49:27 By a container?

**OH:** 49:29 Well, it wasn't a container back then, you know, they were just freighters, you know.

DH: Just bigger ships.

OH: Big, big ships! Yeah. That would be bringing freight and stuff into the port of Savannah. No, you had cargo on like that stuff? Well, anyway, that's how he got run over by that ship. I mean, it was—shrimping was a dangerous job. I mean, I almost lost my life out there.

DH: How so?

OH: Well, um when I talk about the single rigs before we converted over to the thing called double rigs.

DH: Yes.

OH: You used to have a big deck plate on the back of the boat. And what happened is when you, you got the nets out, you had to, you know, back the boat up, and you had a big chain, and this chain had a hook on it. And you would put that hook across the cables to hold it down over the back of the boat. Well, we were in a storm, down in the Gulf of Mexico over off of Campeche. And we used to have a thing called a trinet, you know, and what the trinet was, it was as a smaller net, that you would put overboard, and you would like, while you were dragging, it

would have the smaller net that would you know, go out and ever so many, maybe 30 minutes or so you would probably pull it back to see what was actually going into the net.

**DH:** 51:15 Oh, so the trinet acts like a little sample net.

**OH:** 51:18 That's right, the trinet was like a sample net. That's correct. And it would, you know, give you an idea of what the bottom was like that you were on.

DH: Without having to pull the whole net up.

OH: Without having to pull the whole net up out the, out the water. And so anyway, I was out there, it was pretty rough. And you know, what happened is, we hit some big swells. And over a period of time, I guess years, it had, that chain in the deck plate had weakened. And what happened when I went out there and was coming back, we hit a big swell, and it pulled the chain and deck plate up out of the deck. And that thing came by and it just glanced me across my chest. Now if that thing had actually had full contact with my body or any part of my body, it would have killed me.

DH: Yes!

OH: But through the grace of God, you know, knowing that He still had things for me yet to do. I was spared.

DH: Wow.

OH: Right. So, uh, like I said, it was a dangerous job. You know, you, you get out there and you get into the big swells, you know, you have storms that would come up.

DH: Yes.

OH: You know, um, it was it was a dangerous way of making a living.

**DH:** 52:41 Well, the story that you've painted is really, really fascinating. I mean, I really, thank you for your time and for sharing, sharing your story about your family and your experience and, and how you didn't go into fishing, and the career that you had.

**OH:** 52:57 Oh, but you know, the thing is that for a while after I came back from, from the military. Again, you know, my entrepreneur, I decided that I wanted to do speed boat fishing. Now, I don't know if you ever heard that?

**DH:** 53:13 I haven't. I've heard of speed boats. I've heard of fish. I've never heard anybody tell me how you do the two together.

**OH:** 53:18 Yeah, we did. I did speed boat fishing. In fact, my brother came in with me. And because of him, I lost my speedboat. But anyway, what happened is my, my father built me some nets, and what he did he used like, I have some three-foot doors, which are much smaller than the regular doors you know. Because the regular doors, you have like six 8 or 10-foot doors. So, he built me some like three, three and a half foot doors. And he built me a net, like 80-foot net, you know, as compared to those big nets you see out there and that's relatively small. But the thing was, I was in the in the shrimping season catchin' a whole lot of shrimp, you know. So, I was making, I was making two, three times amount of money on the weekend...

**DH:** Less effort.

**OH:** ...that people were making, who was going to places like the union camp every day to go to work. All right. I mean, I was making that kind of money. Because my, my fuel costs was low.

**DH:** Yes. No crew.

**OH:** The operating costs, right. And the only crew I had was my brother. And I was, you know, sharing stuff with him. But see, he got a big head, my brother did, and he wanted to showboat. All right. So, what happened is, I was I was putting my boat in over at Mr. Young, which was over there on Wilmington Island. So, my brother got the idea one day after I had left, that he's gone bring the boat around and tie it up in, in Thunderbolt, you know. Among those big old boats that are down there! And, and what happened is, you know, during the course of the night, it get caught up among those big boats, and it got sunk. All right. And what happened in the sinking process is that it messed up the engine because that salt water got into that engine. And, you know, the boat wasn't much good and after that, but...

**DH:** 55:39 Gotta love siblings (laughing).

**OH:** 55:41 Oh, yeah. Yeah, but the thing is that that that cut the thing out in so far as, you know, me wanting to try and pursue anything else in so far as the shrimping industry was concerned. But I don't think I would have continued in it anyway because the fact was, I had already, you know, begun to do other things.

**DH:** 56:09 Yes, you'd advanced your education. Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

**OH:** 56:17 I hope the information would be beneficial to your study.

**DH:** 56:21 I'm sure that it will be and to students who listen to this and want to have an idea, you know, of their local heritage. One thing we don't have is, you know, really good recordings of what our local Black history is, so thank you for that.

**OH:** 56:36 You're welcome. I'm an advocate of Black history to begin with.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Michelle Duncan 06/03/2022

Review by Molly Graham [DATE]