

Interview with Cassie Williams

Narrator: Cassie Williams

Interviewer: Dr. Dionne Hoskins, Monet Murphy

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Location: Thunderbolt, Georgia

Project Name: Georgia Black Fishermen

Project Description: African American participation in marine-related careers began as early as 1796, when the federal government issued Seamen's Protection Certificates to merchant mariners defining them as "citizens" of the United States effectively making maritime employment one way for Blacks to shape their identities. This project documents the fishery-related occupations of African Americans in coastal Georgia 1865 to present and gather information for future work that may ascertain the relationship between their decreased participation and changes in regional fish populations and the fishing industry.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Dionne Hoskins

Transcript Team: Michelle Duncan, PhD.

Abstract:

On June 15, 2010, Dr. Dionne Hoskins and Money Murphy interviewed Cassie Williams as part of the Georgia Black Fishermen oral history collection. Cassie, a native of Thunderbolt, Georgia—a small community five miles southeast of Savannah in Chatham County, was born in 1934 and was the youngest of eight children. After completing six years of school in Savannah, she traveled to New York to finish her education, but had to return before graduation to take care of her father. Cassie grew up surrounded by a fishing community, where she and her husband of 53 years raised their children and grandchildren in the house he built. Cassie recalls, in vivid detail, the locations and owners—Desaocka, Sasser, Tumo, and Ambos—of prominent shrimp factories located throughout Savannah in her lifetime and the changes to the landscape of River Drive, formally known as Thunderbolt Bluff. She provides the names of Black captains who operated the boats owned by the shrimp factories and the many changes that occurred to the fishing industry and populations. Although she never went fishing, she enjoys the seasonal bounty of whiting and flounder, caught by local fisherman, and loved cleaning fish big or small.

Cassie Williams: When I was—when we, when I came up the folks would say Mr. so and so run the boat, but now they say operate! (laughter) You hear what I'm saying? That's Geechee understand, but now about what I'm gonna say now. I know one person operated was the captain of one of Mr. Tumo boats and his name was uh, they called him Sapelo. But his name was James Harvey Hall and his son is the one ran for mayor in Thunderbolt, John Hall. That's his daddy.

Dionne Hoskins: James Harvey Hall and his nickname was Sapelo, just like the island.

CW: That's right, because I think that's where he came from Sapelo Island. Okay, now I'm gonna bring you from from the casino back this side. The next...

DH: The casino is where Palmer is now, where they build the boats?

CW: That's right, but I'm not gonna take you around Falligan; that's Fallgan Avenue. I'm gonna bring you back. I'm gonna bring you back to River Drive.

DH: Yes ma'am.

CW: Ok, now the next shrimp factory was...

DH: I'm going to draw a map; this is River Drive. So, you say the shrimp factory—this is River Drive and this is Victory.

CW: Uh huh. I started that side; I started that way. You see, that was the Tumo dock.

DH: Ok. Where the river—is that where the river? Where the restaurant used to be?

CW: There's some boats there now; some boats are there now!

DH: Okay, the Shrimp Factory.

CW: Now! Ok, the next thing is the Shrimp Factory belonged to Joe and Mike Ceasroni. C-E-A-S-R- O-N-I, Ceasroni.

DH: Okay.

CW: And they had two Black captains I know; one of them was Mr. Willie Redman and one of them was Mr. Lawrence Davis.

DH: OK. Willie Redman.

CW: They both deceased. Mr. Willie died about five years ago and Mr. Lawrence died in uh.

DH: What was Mr. Lawrence's first name?

CW: Lawrence Davis. Each one them was captain of—I don't know so much about this. Because when I was a child a lot of people would go round there in the (inaudible), but they wouldn't let me go. (laughing) Now the next dock is um Louis G. Ambos A-M-B-O-S and son. And the son name was Kennedy Francis Ambos. We call him senior cause he had a son named after him. Ok, now he owned a few shrimp boats, but now one person I knew that was married to my aunt. He was a captain of—his name was Clarence Dolly.

DH: Darling?

CW: D-O-L-L-Y. He was a captain of the Pocahontas.

MM: Oh yeah. These are the names you gave me over the phone!

CW: Captain of the Pocahontas and he worked, I think he retired, he died in '68. I think he retired in 1962 from fishing.

DH: And he married your sister?

CW: No, no, no. He was married to one of my aunts.

DW: Okay.

CW: Her name was Louise Bennett Dolly. Now I'm going to leave, I'm going to leave Thunderbolt Bluff, which is River Drive. I'm gonna take you across Wilmington Bridge. That's ok?

MM: Yeah! That's fine! (laughing)

CW: Now we gonna go Wilmington Bridge, turning left, Esposito had a—we didn't have to say that but anyway, it was a shrimp factory turning left off the Wilmington Bridge.

DW: Okay, oh. Okay, down there where the marina is now; down that dirt road.

CW: That was a shrimp factor. And the name who owned that factory was Mr. Charlie, Mr. Charles D-E-S-A-O-C-K-A, Desaocka.

DH: Okay and he had a shrimp factory?

CW: Uh huh. And he had three boats. One was the Green Wave, one was the Notre Dame, and one was the Crimson Tide.

MM: So, like football man.

CW: He was Italian and he came from Alabama. And he was a Catholic; I say that's why he put Notre Dame you know. I don't know where the name came from. Anyway, it was two persons now I don't know which one of the brothers captained what boat. But Mr. Joe Thorpe was the captain of one of his boats.

DW: And he was Black?

CW: Oh yeah! All these people were Blacks, these captains. And then Mr. James Thorpe, that's Joe's brother.

DW: James?

CW: Uh huh, Thorpe. He was captain in one of the boats. Let me take you further down now. Imma take you directly to Wilmington Island. Wilmington River and bridge you go straight turn to your right going to Wilmington Island. Okay. Billy Sasser owned a shrimp factory.

DH: Okay, wait I just got lost. We went down to Wilmington Island and we turned on Johnny Mercer?

CW: Oh yeah, yeah, right on the right; right to Johnny Mercer, before you hit down there to Wilmington that's right on the side. He had a lot of boats down there and his name was Billy Sasser, S-A-S-S-E-R.

DH: Okay, he's right before you get to that Publix?

CW: That's right, exactly! Before you get to the land; see he was right to the bridge okay. On the right-hand side.

DH: Got it. Billy Sasser.

CW: S-A-S-S-E-R. Okay, now he had a fleet of boats, but I know one person that was a captain of one of his boats. His name was Mr.—it's not abbreviated and his name was... He died about two years ago. His named was Mr. Joe Washington.

DH: Did he live in East Savannah?

CW: Mr. Joe Washington? He lived right up Shell Road, right there. You know where the little bitty church is? You know where Martha Street is? You turn there and the house right on the corner with a big W on it. Got a daughter named Freda, she sing. You know Freda Washington sing? Well anyway. He died about two years ago.

DH: Now was Mr. Thorpe, he lived in East Savannah?

CW: No, no, no, no. Mr. Joe Thorpe lived on Gibbon Street; he built the house there on Gibbon. Joe Thorpe live on Gibbon Street. And Mr. James Thorpe lived on C-O-L-O-R-A-D-O that would be Colorado Avenue, right here in Savannah.

DH: Ok, just up from Pennsylvania?

CW: No, no no. Colorado Avenue—before you turn left to go on Gibbon Street right on this side where it say Chism Street. A little house on the corner, you go further down, right, that's where Colorado is. He lived on Colorado Avenue and that's it.

DH: Wow. That's a lot! (laughing)

MM: That's a lot of names! (laughing) Quite a history.

DH: Wow, you remember all of that!

CW: I would talk to people and they say, "Look at this lady, you got to meet her she got a photographic mind! ". (laughing)

DH: She does!

CW: I can remember people's faces from three years old! (inaudible)..say I ain't never been around nobody like her. (laughing) You really (inaudible) spit it out now. Ya'll get an orange.

DH: I love oranges; I would be happy to, thank you.

CW: Oh yeah get one for her too.

MM: Thank you!

CW: Yeah, you see I'm old people. Used to cook a plenty and everybody eat.

DH and MM: Thank you. Thank you so much.

CW: I'm glad I was some help to you.

DH: You are!

CW: Now Mr. Otis you said? Now, I've never seen him, but I know his granddaddy Mr. Prince

Hayward. I knew his uncle, his mom, his grandma—Mr. Prince Hayward his mama. Mr. Prince Hayward, his daddy's daddy. So, um I know him and I know his uncle, but he lived up North for many years. The oldest fella and then he came down. He said he purchased a home I'm not sure you know.

DH: He lives over near Nottingham.

CW: He was telling me that.

DH: Thank you. Now Mrs. Williams did you fish too when you were growing up?

CW: Nooooooo! [laughing]

DH: Not for work or for eating, none of that?

CW: I eat any kind of fish!

MM: Did you cook it?

CW: And I don't mind cleaning them.

DH: But you ain't catching them?

CW: But see how—now I've never been fishing, but see what happened. The boats go out and they used to have so much shrimp until the mast almost break off. And about 10 o'clock somebody would come by and say, "Miss Cassie! " and I'd say, "Yeah?" "I brought you some fish! " About five o'clock someone say, "Miss Cassie, I bought you some shrimps! " (laughing) Then in the wintertime and they not doing anything, I always find them! So, I can give them some change for them. Oh yeah.

DH: So, when they brought fish, like I know now whiting are real popular. Did y'all get whiting back then?

CW: That's all it was, whiting and flounder. You see it's a season for fish. At a certain time, it's a lot of the whittings. Then it's a time for the founders. Then round November, my brother used to bring the spots and it be, I mean real large like that.

DH: I love spot!

CW: But I experienced some of the fish now. The fish seem like, I say they drowned (inaudible). Because the meat's soft.

DH: Hmmmh. Really?

CW: Yeah, I noticed the meat...

MM: So, is it the same fish, the whiting?

CW: The whiting to me (inaudible) too. Cause you see the season opened up last week because the season was closed. You couldn't fish in Georgia water. The season closed in January. Sometimes they extend it and then it opens back up in May. Now they tell me in Carolina they fish the whole year, but not Georgia. Georgia closes waters.

DH: Miss Cassie, you follow that and you don't fish?

CW: I don't fish and I ain't never been hardly to the bluff. (laughing)

DH: So whiting and flounder, huh?

CW: Flounder is good fish; real good fish. Now when I was younger, I used to eat catfish. But after I got—you take the catfish now, you clean them up. But now you have to get boiling water and take that blue stuff off it. You can't eat half that and we put the celery and the bell pepper.

MM: Sound good! [laughing]

CW: Pancake flour because the pancake flour grounds quicker than the other flour. Yeah.

DH: I didn't know that.

CW: And then you put in a saturator and take the head and clean it, that's the part I like. I had an uncle, my mama's brother, he was up in age he live around in Cedar Street by the college. And he would visit me every day of his life. And he said that something I don't know, but you know I don't think I would eat no catfish. And one day I cooked some catfish and some brown rice and I put a few white potatoes in it and I mean he ate it. So, about a week after, I say uncle Sunny did you know that was catfish? He said, "What? It sure was good. (laughing)

DH: Oh, you didn't tell him?

CW: I didn't tell him! But now, in the last 20 years, I hadn't eaten any catfish. For some reason I can't even say why but I just don't bother with it. But any kind of fish and don't care how small it is, I'll clean it. See a lot of people like fish, but they don't want to clean 'em. But I'll clean 'em, uh huh. Yeah.

DH: My mother cleans her fish with a spoon. How do you clean yours?

CW: Oh, with a knife. Now when I was a child, when I was coming up this a new thing people opening fish in the back.

DH: Wide open, I don't like that!

CW: No, no. See I grew up we opened right in the front. Uh huh and then we put in on the side, you sweep down on that side you know right. Put about four in a pan, oh man you talking about good, yes ma'am. Now one thing I do not like is shrimp.

DH: Really?

CW: No ma'am! I don't care for no shrimp; I don't care how you fix 'em, I don't like 'em. My children are like, "Mama, we going to (restaurant) we'll bring you a seafood platter. I said, "Don't put no shrimp on it! "

MM: So, is it something about the taste you don't like?

CW: I just don't like shrimp. I just don't like it.

DH: Now how many children do you have?

CW: Oh, one of my sons finished college in Texas and he died in '86. (inaudible) His wife and the baby still call me. My grandbaby, his son Brice, he writes Grandma Cassie on the envelope. And his wife is married again and her husband is a probation officer. He calls me mama. Because that's what we want to do, you can't you don't separate families. He's my grandson, it's his son, because my son is deceased. So, that his son he's raising you see. You don't get in (inaudible)—my grand you know Black people got too much going on and no money! (laughing) That's one thing with Black people, we do not have good money. But now getting back to the children and Walter is here. He finished Georgia Southern and he's here. That's my youngest son. My husband died—married to him 53 and a half years—he died the third of March last year. Yeah, he built this whole how by his own hands.

DH: I was looking at the beautiful brick work.

CW: Yeah, but he didn't do the brick work now. We had that done about 15 years ago. A brick layer did that, but this house all this house he built by his own hands.

MM; Very beautiful.

CW: He was a good—he was an excellent man. He was the best.

MM: So how long were you two married?

CW: Fifty-three and a half years. My husband said, "Wait a minute now, I want to make sure what

the marriage license say.” (laughing) I know him since kindergarten.

DH: Oh really?

CW: Oh yeah!

DH: Now, did you grow up here in Thunderbolt?

CW: Born and raised on Thunderbolt.

DH: Really? So, then where did you go to school?

CW: Went to school right in that corner, (inaudible) a little school on Savannah State, called Powell Lab.

DH: Oh yeah!

CW: Yeah!

DH: You went to Powell Lab! Mr. Hayward went to Powell Lab. You know which building Powell Lab is?

MM: The red brick, the red brick one.

CW: Right on the side there; you used to could get to it, but it got that place fenced in now. We used to go on walks after we got our lesson. We called it the dirt road, but it's Thompson Road on the right exactly.

MM: I think they made that into a computer center now.

DH: Yeah. Now it's Computer Services. They changed it—it was an elementary school.

CW: That's what it was, from one to six grade!

DH: And then it became a nursery school when I was in college, in the 80s, and then it became the Department of Social Work.

CW: Oh! Okay, okay.

DH: Now they have our computer technology people in there.

CW: Oh, I see. So we go to school over there from one to six grade. Okay, now after leaving sixth grade, you know, we were segregated right? Because Thunderbolt had a school right there.

DH: Yes. The one that's still there?

CW: No, no. Right where the museums is at, that used to be a school there but you see we couldn't go because you know, we was Black. You know it was segregated. So, my daddy made arrangement with his sister for me to come to New York to go to school up there. And we lived in Corona Long Island. And they say I was the first from the South that was not put back another grade. But what happened, had some cousins there. We lived in the apartment house; my aunt was renting from them on the second floor, you know. And I went and I kind of cased them, find out what all—how they are. I said let me see some they stuff you know and went to the library and start studying and all like that. They didn't put me back, they put me in seventh grade; I was passed it. They say—well what they wanted to say that I was the first Black, but they didn't say that! (inaudible) And when I was, when I was promoted to the 11th grade, my dad got sick. And so then I had to come home and take care of him. Not only did he get sick, but e had a lot of real estate.

DH: What did your daddy do?

CW: Oh, my dad who was a man that he got oysters and stuff. He never did years as time went on he started working at Bonaventure Cemetery.

DH: He used to catch oysters and sell oyster?

CW: No, he would take it to a factory and then they have the people to open 'em.

MM: What factory was it?

CW: Right down to Mr. Lewis.

MM: Okay same place.

CW: Okay. Mr. Lewis had the oyster factory and in the winter, right there Lewis Ambos.

DH: Ok Lewis Ambos. Ok so your dad collected oysters and sold them to Ambos. Oh wow!

MM: And then took them there.

CW: That's right! They had a factory; he had a factory. I just thought you just wanted to know about the captains.

DH and MM: We want to know everything! [laughing]

DH: You were saying, you would come home to see your daddy and he worked that he did that [inaudible].

CW: [inaudible] when he would collect the oysters in the winter.

DH: What was his name?

CW: My dad name was Jerry Melton.

DH: Jerry Melton?

CW: M-E-L-T-O-N

MM: So, you say he collected during the winter. Did he do anything else, out of the season?

CW: [laughing] No, but you know at that time I remember when the oysters was 25 cents a gallon.

DH: Now around what—how old were you when that was, or do you know when that was?

CW: I was like 10, 12 years old. Oysters was \$10 a gallon.

DH: And you father stopped doing that?

CW: Oh, yes he started working at Bonaventure Cemetery. Let me get, let me get a real history for you. You want to get the A.G. Tuma?

DH: I got the okay; yes, ma'am.

CW: Okay. Now I don't remember, I don't remember, but anyway whether people opened the oysters with Mr. Tuma or not, but I do know Mr. Tuma would ship oysters to Bluffton—and the place is still open—to Bluffton, South Carolina Oyster Factory and that place is still open. And you know White people they carry the name on, but we stop sometimes we stop. They still got that oyster factory there.

DH: It's still called Tuma?

CW: No, no, no, no!

MM: It's Bluffton, South Carolina.

CW: Right, right, right.

DH: Now, did you did you did your dad learn oyster collecting from his dad or did somebody else do it or he just picked it up?

CW: I think it was just something he picked up.

DW: He just picked.

CW: Yeah, just picked up, um hum.

DW: Did any of you and your siblings help him or y'all just wait until he came home with the oysters?

CW: Just wait...That's right! (laughing)

MM: Like you said, you didn't want to get out there. (laughing)

DH: So, you were telling us you have your son Walter.

CW: Oh yeah, let me get back to my children. I have Walter. I have Tyrone, he's in Washington, DC and Maryland and I have my daughter, Sharon, she lives in Boca Raton, Florida.

DH: Oh ok. Tyrone is in Maryland and Walter is in?

CW: Right here! He lives here, yeah. And I told you my son died in Texas. His name was Joseph—he was Reverend Joseph Mark Williams; he was a minister yeah. And then I have my grandson. That's my grandson.

DH: Hello how are you?

CW: They finding out some information about um—I told 'em it used to be Thunderbolt Bluff, but now it's River Drive.

DH: Hi, I'm Dionne Hoskins and we are at Savannah State. I am professor in the Marine Science program and we're collecting the history of Blacks in the fishing industry.

CW: Okay, yeah. Okay. Okay. I'll put it up. And then my daughter, Gail, she lives next door. Yeah.

DH: That must be nice.

CW: And she has children. One of her daughters graduated—we put so much in her—one of her daughters graduated Dean's List as an R.N. May the 8th and she took the state board the first time and she passed it.

DH: Oh, that's wonderful!

CW: And I have I have my other daughter next to her; she's at Armstrong State. Her name is Rebecca, the one graduated. And then Sharon, she's there now; she's about to become a sophomore.

DH: Okay, this is the other grand. So, what about your brothers and sisters?

CW: Oh, they're all deceased. I'm the last one, they're all deceased.

DH: Are you the youngest?

CW: I'm the youngest; I'm the eighth child. I'm the youngest. The many of them (inaudible) I haven't even seen 'em. And I thank you all so much for coming by.

DH: Oh, we thank you, you have been so helpful!

CW: But I've never seen Mr. Hayward.

DH: Well, we gonna let him know that he is missing out on something by not seeing you.
(laughing)

CW: Talk with him on the telephone, you know, but I know his I know his dad, but and I don't know his mother. He talk of his mother, but I don't know her. And I know his grandfather, Mr. Hayward. Yeah. And I know one of his uncles, but that's as far as you know.

DH: Now Mrs. Cassie we don't need to be in delicate but we just like to know kind of what generation we're talking to you. Do you mind telling us how old you are?

CW: Oh, I'm 75 years old.

MM: A beautiful 75 years old.

DH: I hope I have skin like yours when I get...

MM: I hope I can remember stuff like you. (laughing)

CW: Look here, I hadn't been to doctors since 1965!

DH and MM: Oh, wow!

CW: No, no, no. If I need any medicine I make it myself. Yeah. I made my own medicine. The doctor don't know what's going on with me.

DH: Well, thank you!

CW: Glad y'all came by!

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

Reviewed by Michelle Duncan 10/28/2022

Review by Nicole Zador 10/16/2024