

African American Burial Ground Project (AABGP)
Oral History Program
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Antoinette Jackson (AJ): Yes. My name is Antoinette Jackson, I'm a professor at the University of South Florida working on the African American Burial Ground Project. And I'm here with Ms. Cobb, and we're going to talk about her knowledge of the cemeteries in the Tampa Bay area and anything else she may want to tell us. So I'm going to start by asking you to state your name and spell it.

Dominique Cobb (DC): Okay. Hello, my name is Dominique Cobb, D-O-M-I-N-I-Q-U-E. Last name Cobb, C-O-B-B.

AJ: Okay. And where do you live, where are you located? In Tampa or where?

DC: I currently reside in East Tampa.

AJ: Okay. All right. And do you mind giving your date of birth?

DC: My date of birth is July 25, 1985.

AJ: Okay. All right. And so how long have you lived, where were you born, and how long have you lived in the Tampa Bay area?

DC: I was born and raised in Tampa, Florida. My generation is here, so this is my natural ground so to speak.

AJ: Okay. Could you describe your race, your ethnicity, your gender, or just state what that is?

DC: I am an African in America. I'm ethnically African. I'm of African descent. Yeah.

AJ: And your gender?

DC: Female. She, her.

AJ: Okay. So, just in general, before we get started, what is your relationship and your knowledge of the African American cemeteries in Tampa, particularly Zion Cemetery in Robles Park?

DC: That was a very interesting piece. I knew nothing about Zion Cemetery until it actually happened. A friend of mine invited me to a session that they were talking about it and I'm like, Oh, wow, this is very interesting. And I love history, so I was just like, Hey, this is something that I would like to be a part of, no matter what side it's on, I just want to be a part of figuring out how this happened and how it disappeared over the time. So that was my interest and my start of Zion Cemetery.

AJ: Wow. So have you been over to that area where the cemetery is located? And when was the last time you were there? And when was your first introduction to that area?

DC: My first introduction, like I said, a friend told me about it. And I heard about it, you know, chatter. But I actually have a family member, two family members who live right there on the grounds. You literally walk out of their door and you see the sign with the names. And I was actually leaving her house, dropping her off some food, and I came out her door and I was like, Oh my goodness, this is the exact location. You know, and seeing those names and seeing baby's names, the actual manifest of walking out someone's door, that made me feel some type of way. But seeing it made me say, "Hey, I'm looking at the names, so I know that someone is there." So that was very interesting. And that was back in 2019, when I saw that.

AJ: Right. And could you give me the family member's name? Perhaps how long they had lived in—that was Robles Park? Is that where you're talking about, where that is?

DC: Yes. One currently still resides there, her name is **Elbony** Howard. She still lives there. She should be in the process of relocating since, so we just got news that they're going to start the process of relocating those individuals. So she is relocating.

AJ: And did she have any comments to you regarding the whole situation of learning about the graves being on that site, and her proximity, as you said, to everything that was going on? Did she directly say anything? What was her reaction?

DC: She was concerned. She was actually, I didn't want to be too, when I saw the names, I didn't want to be like, "Hey, there's a manifest." She didn't even know. She just thought it was a nice mural that was blocking the deteriorated conditions over there. So she didn't think anything of it. So afterwards, maybe a day or so later, she called me and was like, "Hey, Dee, what's going on." I'm sorry, that's what she calls me, Dee Dee. She's like, "What's going on because

I've seen people going over there?" And I kind of gave her a brief history and she was like, "Well, nobody told me." So I gave her the information that I had researched in the last few days, and it was alarming to her. So having to calm someone down, then worrying, Does she have to move right away? The emotional part to that was something that I kind of had to say, "How can we handle this?" So that was a bit much.

AJ: Yeah. Did she have to move as a result of the burials there, or was there a process of relocating people for other reasons for the complex?

DC: From what I understand, I could be corrected if I'm wrong, but she's still there, so there wasn't a, Hey, you have to move. But those who were on the opposite side of the street where that mural and picture, they had to move almost immediately. So yeah, she didn't have to move, but her neighbors did.

AJ: Okay. And was she involved in any meetings or conversations with anybody at the housing complex regarding just what was going on after she found out? Has she attended or has she mentioned anything about any meetings about what next?

DC: From my understanding, there was a briefing about what's going on, what's the process, along with Robles Park eventually being, you know, repurposed or demolished and rebuilt. Those talks were kind of already, so she knew about that, but bringing along the cemetery and the investigation, I feel as though there should have been more wrap around service for those who actually have to see it. Like I said, leaving out her door, seeing those names, not knowing what they're actually connected to, that's a mental aspect that I don't believe was grasped. So I know that took a toll on her, and the other families that constantly have to see that. So that's been going on for the last year.

AJ: Yeah, no that's true. So it is a toll. That's surprising. I'll circle back around to a little bit of that if you have any more information about what's going on there, we can follow up. But I want to go back to more of your relationship to things. Now, your parents, were they born and raised in Tampa, Florida area?

DC: Yes. Like I said, I come from a long line of Tampanians. My great-grandfather actually laid the brick for Nebraska Avenue, so we have history here. We were the longshoremen, we were the vegetable crop growers, so yes, we have a long line of families, both my mother and father's side.

AJ: Okay. Could you state your mother's full name and then your father's full name if you can?

DC: Yes. My mother's full name is Tanja Hughes Cobb, and my father is Melvin Cobb.

AJ: Okay. Are they both still alive?

DC: Yes.

AJ: And your grandparents, your paternal and maternal grandparents' names?

DC: Paternal: Jessie Cobb, Beatrice Cobb. Maternal: Barbara Foster and John Foster.

AJ: And your mom's maiden name, did you say that in your—

DC: Hughes.

AJ: Okay, okay. Thank you. And they all lived right in, in what areas of Tampa?

DC: My maternal side is more of the East Tampa, that's where I reside now, and my father is the West Tampa Robles Park area. So I'm very familiar with that area.

AJ: Okay. So when you were growing up, did you spend, like you said, your grandparents or your father was living there, did you spend time there at all? Like did you visit Robles Park?

DC: Oh, yes. Robles Park was the area, the pond, the Robles Park pond was the area that we actually on Sundays had kickball games. When I graduated high school, I would go there on Sundays to take my dog for a walk while other people were having parties. Just the festive community-ness in Robles Park has always been there for the last, as long as I can remember.

AJ: And the housing complex was there throughout the time you're talking about, around the pond?

DC: Correct.

AJ: Was it predominately African American folk around at that time period that you were growing up, in high school and things like that, living around the Robles Park pond, particularly?

DC: One hundred percent. I remember walking from my uncle, who used to be at the store that's on Floribraska, and he would walk us down to the Robles Park pond. And we would just make little sandwiches and kind of hang out there for the day, and we knew when it was starting to get dark, we had to make it back around to Tampa Heights which was a few blocks over. But we enjoyed that whole neighborhood, it was very walkable then and safe, in my terms.

AJ: And what was the store? I'm just trying to get context for some of the businesses that you might have seen growing up.

DC: I don't remember the name, but it's on the corner of Floribraska and, I believe, Central. I'm not even sure if that store's still here.

AJ: That's what I was wondering, yeah. And when your father was growing up, was it also around the pond in the same area that you're talking about?

DC: Yes. My father was, he was one of those triathletes at Hillsborough High School. So you know, coming from Hillsborough, you have to walk through Robles Park to get to Tampa Heights, so as we call them, that was a hood inside of a hood. So coming through Robles Park, going through Tampa Heights, I know he has stories about that. But being an athlete, you know, back then from the history, there wasn't a lot of busing, so he did a lot of walking back and forth through that area.

AJ: And do you remember any of the churches or were there any churches that you're still associated with in that area of town?

DC: There's one church that is still there. I remember going to as a kid on fifth Sundays. Fifth Sunday is unity, that's when we visit other churches in the community. I don't know the exact name of that church, but it's still there now. I think it's the Rock of Jesus. But that's right there in Robles Park. That church, they would feed the community, give out clothing, from what I can remember back then. That was the early, well, midnineties and two-thousands.

AJ: It had been there at the time of your father's growing up too? Do you know?

DC: I'm not sure, but I know that area was predominately black, so of course, with us there's churches. There're churches, there's stores, there's food. So I know it had to be a few.

AJ: Yeah. That's what I was just trying to get, some context for the churches around there, but I presume that there were quite a few. So do your parents or your father or anybody still have friends or connections to that area?

DC: Yes. My uncles and father, they're still in that area. Unfortunately, that area has been gentrified, so they're not able to live—our family home was at 112 West Lawrence Street, and I would love to go back and buy some land there and build my grandmother's home back, but unfortunately, we can't afford that area. So that's not their permanent residence, but they do have friends that still live in that area. And again, they still frequent the park every once in a while. So yeah, we still frequent the area.

AJ: And do you know anything about that Catholic church or something right, Sacred Heart, or something right in that same area you're talking about or no?

DC: Yes. That's on Florida Avenue. I don't have any family that goes there. I actually had a coworker that went there. But no, I did not frequent that school.

AJ: And did your father or any of your relatives ever talk about Robles Park, the housing complex, any context to it?

DC: Oh, of course. We talk about Robles Park often. I don't know if this part is in the interview, but I previously worked for the Tampa Housing Authority.

AJ: Okay.

DC: I actually left them in 2020, last year, during the beginning of the pandemic. But with me, being involved with the housing authority, again, I have family that still live there. I have families that have to use those types of services, so I try to make sure I'm abreast of what's going on so that I can relay it to them. Most of the things that a lot of the people in that area miss is they don't have a liaison. Not a caseworker, I mean an actual liaison. Hey, I need you all to know what's going on so we can make some moves. So I try to be that for my family that lives there or friends that reside there.

AJ: And do you know any of the people in the NAACP, the role that they're playing within that whole setup, with regard to the cemetery, or just regards to the housing complex and the things that need to be done there in terms of, you know—

DC: I do know that the, I've heard, that the NAACP is actively working with the housing authority to make sure there is, during this relocation process, that there is help. I'm not sure if it's evident, if that is actually helping, but I would love more help from NAACP, especially the City of Tampa. What a lot of people don't understand, especially with the closing of other places like West Tampa—I was actually a part of that. I actually got to see my apartment that I lived in at five or six years old, actually get tore down. I actually had the address. But seeing that, again, that's a mental trigger. My family has lived here for years, and in two to four years, I come back and it's going to look completely different. And what I believe a lot of people miss is that the wraparound service that is needed for that. Because, again, I've been in this place for forty, fifty years, my grandmother, my mom lives here. And to come back and not see that anymore, you know, that's a bit different. Because I still like to drive around my neighborhood home to say, "Hey, I lived here on the river, I lived here. But I can't tell you I lived here because that has been demolished." So that's a concern for me.

AJ: Yeah, and I think the whole idea of the cemeteries being erased or built over and like you're saying, a lot of the houses no longer being there. A lot of history, it takes a toll on the history of a community.

DC: Yeah, your psyche.

AJ: When you hear the words "African American Burial Grounds and Remembering Project," what comes to mind, and what kinds of things would you want to come out of a project such as this? First of all, what comes to mind when you hear that?

DC: What comes to mind is, Don't let them forget me. Oh, I get chills saying that because, like I say, when I walked out that door and saw the manifest of names, I saw baby names, I saw twins, I saw mothers, and one thing that I believe our culture, that tends to happen, is we forget our ancestors. And we have a complete site, a whole cemetery of people that may be connected to me, may be connected to you, and they are not, I feel as, I don't want to say I feel, I need them not to be forgotten. So that is very important to me. That's why when Ms. Wright asked me about that, I was like, "Yes, what do you need from me? What do you want to know?" Because I think it's so important to make sure that we don't forget those who may have contributed to our society, who have contributed to our course of living. Those same people that are, you know, in those burial grounds, they may have laid these same bricks for, you know, and I feel as though they need to be, not just their name read, but remembered, Hey, this is sacred ground.

AJ: Yes, and I have felt what you're saying completely. And if you had to suggest some type of way that they would memorialize that site, that ground, as you said, that sacred ground, would there be anything that you would want to see them do?

DC: I would want something with serenity, something peaceful, because you are talking about someone's final resting place. And when you go to, you know, different areas, they usually have a memorial park, they are definitely not excavating. But, you know, it's just a place of serenity reflection. Again, one of the stories that I read from a family, she didn't even know she had family there, and you know, where do you go to mourn that? You go stand in front of someone's apartment, their door? Like, Hey, I know I felt the connection. So being able to have a place to go to and say, "Let me sit here. I may not have known them, but let me read about them, let me see some of the stories of the people who lived here." And that's one of the opportunities that I'm glad I did participate in with the Tampa Housing Authority, is that they actually had a memorial celebration, and they read the names of those who were buried there. And that kind of hit home to me, because hearing last names that are similar to mine, hearing about a mother and twins who died during childbirth, that hits me a bit different because, well, I don't want to go into the whole healthcare side of things, but knowing that my people, possibly my people, are here, I want to make sure that they're not forgotten.

AJ: Yeah. And one of the things you kind of touch upon, which is also an important part of projects like these, is that you may not directly be related to the people buried there or buried at some of these erased sites. But you express really well the connection and the reasons why those places and people are important. And I think a lot of times people miss that, especially with some of these types of African American cemeteries, the black cemeteries, and the connections because there's a lot of—

DC: Right. So speaking of which and I hope there's no legal, anything legal. So I sit on Historic Preservation for City of Tampa, and I did not make the connections with all the different things that are going on in Tampa until a few months ago. A board came up, or a group of people came up, and they were talking about Mr. Doby. And actually renaming a part of Hyde Park to something else and then I was looking through the information on the site and I'm like, Hey, this

is the same person who created the cemetery back in 1910. No one's going to talk about this? Wait, let's take a pause. And that was very interesting to me, because this man purchased this property for his family to have a sacred place to bury them. And in the midst of all of that happening the land was somehow given to someone else or taken from someone else for 300 dollars. That was very interesting to me. So I would like to get to the bottom of that, to, you know, how did that all come apart? Because this is a very prominent person, and to have a space like this and then twenty, thirty, forty, years later, now there's a housing project on top of it. There are some things that really need to be answered. And I hope that the City of Tampa, whomever, can answer those questions for families who possibly have family there, you know?

AJ: I think, yeah, that's definitely another interesting connection you're making, so thank you for definitely pointing that out. That is a big question as well. Any other trajectories? You're really hitting on some of the key ones that really are important, you know, for people to think about for these sites.

DC: I really hope that the City of Tampa, the housing authority, NAACP, actually take a step back and not just say, Oh, we want to repurpose this area, we want to give back and put some more apartments here. Let's go back, all the way back to 1910 when Mr. Doby said, "This is my land that I want for my family to have a place to be buried and comfortable. We can come here and memorialize them." And somewhere in between that time, that did not happen, so let's go back and answer that question. How could we make sure that the original owners of this land is satisfied? Because, again, we have ancestral, this is an ancestral plane right here, and you don't want to tamper with that, and you want to make sure you give everyone their due respect. So how could that happen in 2021? That's my question.

AJ: That is a very important one. And like I said, I thank you for that, and I think that's part of the kind of things that interviews such as this and talking to people in community will help bring to the forefront. Are there any more things that you would want us to know, any other connections to any other cemeteries or sacred grounds in Tampa that you kind of want to reflect on before?

DC: There are actually multiple—with kind of following this loosely and all the different things that are going on in the African American community, the Jackson Project, the home, I'm really looking forward to see if I can reach out to someone to kind of get involved with that, because that's a passion of mine also. I just want to preserve the African American history in the City of Tampa, but also bring light to what we have already accomplished. So with saying that, there's a cemetery that's adjacent to King High School. There's a cemetery adjacent to the air force base. Those are all black, African American areas. The one that's adjacent to the air force base, that's Port Tampa, that was the African American town, that was the connection with the now Hyde Park. Those same cemeteries were all connected, so again, I want to make sure that they are not forgotten. If that means me speaking up and making that vocal, then I'm definitely here to do that. But I believe that we can definitely right this wrong because there is some wrongness. There is no way that a home is built on someone's final home. So yes, acknowledge that, but how do

we correct that? So I'm definitely open to speaking with whomever to see if we can see what's fair and reasonable to approach that. But yeah, that is a very important, there are multiple burial grounds that we don't even know about. But we do know on record that the Zion is, there's a whole manifest for it. There are actual, you know, there is information that states this was here for a period of time. How could this have been, you know?

AJ: Yeah, no, I think you really touched upon all the really critical parts. At least for what I'm asking in this interview. I know you've talked, like you said, before. So I want to say thank you, and I know your time is quite valuable, and I want to, you know, hopefully have maybe a follow-up interview after I get a chance to continue to do more research. But for now, I want to thank you for your time.

DC: I do have one other thing.

AJ: Okay, go. Please.

DC: So currently, back in, like I said, 2020, I did decide to follow my other passion which is mental health. So I'm actually working with a non-profit called Metamorphosis Life Assist. And what that is, is the trauma that has happened during the pandemic, things like this, just all the information—

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Give the time to the mental health aspect of it. We know that, knowing that you live in the vicinity of a cemetery, and you have no other place to go, that's an issue. I know I spoke with one resident who, you know, their children were seeing things. And you never know, how do you create a resource for a person like that? So I would hope that with this relocation and this new rebuild, that they offer that type of assistance to those residents who are still there.

AJ: Yeah. That's yet another important point because I also heard that people had felt things and knew of things even before they found the actual cemetery.

DC: Funny story, one of my first months of working at the housing authority, a lady came in from Robles Park and was like, "Hey, I see stuff. There is a ghost in my house." I can't recall her exact location, but there were multiple reports of it. So knowing that and then finding out two years later that there is something there, I'm like, Okay, you know, you have to listen to people when they talk, and you can't write them off as being crazy. We are a special type of people, we feel things. We feel drums, so I know you can feel something else. So that was amazing to me, and come to find out, this lady was telling the truth the whole time she was living, you know. So that is very important, and we have to listen to our people. We have to listen to them. And we have to listen to our kids. Multiple kids had come forward saying that they felt this, they saw this. And you know, that is important, that is very important. We have to make sure that we pay attention to the mental side of things.

AJ: Yeah. I totally agree with that and thank you, again, for speaking to yet another aspect of this whole situation that kind of gets lost sometimes in these kinds of conversations. So I appreciate it. And if you think of anything else, like I said, please reach out again and we can continue this conversation or start a whole new one. I'm sure we'll be talking again. So thank you so much, and I'll turn off this part of the interview that's recording.

DC: Okay.

End of Interview