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Toni Carrier: Hello. I know most of you already. Mable and I are so thrilled to be here today to share Mable's research with you.

This is Mrs. Mable Sims. She is a descendant of the two founding members of Twin Lakes, the first African American community in Hernando County. Another member of her family then branched off and founded Mundan Hill, which was one of the earliest African American communities.

I'm from USF. I represent the African Heritage Project, which is a website. On the back table you'll find my card and also an article that is on our website and looks better in color if you want to visit it. It's pretty much a background history on Mable's property and her efforts over the last few years.

Mable's great-great-grandparents were Hampton St. Clair and Nathaniel O'Neal, and they were the founders of Twin Lakes. Their homestead is still standing on the property, and Mable lives there. Luckily, the home is made of cedar wood and termites, as you probably know, don't care too much for that, so the house is nearly pristine, just absolutely nearly pristine. Mable has done an awful lot of work to restore it.

USF became involved in her project about four years ago. Our portion of the research was to help her to document the historic significance of the site, and also to do some genealogy research. Roger Landers, who had already been involved in Mable's research for a couple of years before that, provided us with the information he already had, and has been and continues to be just a fabulous mentor to us. He pointed us in the right direction, and he pulls us back on track when we stray. So we really appreciate that.

Recently, the Hernando Historical Association—I say recently, but it's actually almost two years—has been involved also with a national register nomination, and also some

funding proposals that we're going to see coming out of the Historical Association. Virginia has been involved in my research for quite some time.

For the last twenty years, Mable has been working in the community, as I'm sure you know. I'm sure it's not the first time you've seen this lady. She's been working to preserve and to share her family's heritage. She has a program where she visits the elementary schools, called History on Wheels. How many times would you say you have been, over the years?

Mable Sims: Oh, I'm—about fifty?

TC: She stays busy, especially during Black History Month; you see her out and about the community. My portion of the research I'll share with you, and then I'm going to turn you over to Mable because that's who you're here to hear today.

Roger gave us some leaves on Grandpa Nathaniel, and also Grandpa Hampton. Grandpa Hampton, we found, was—and his brother Arthur St. Clair—were slaves of Matilda May and Marina May, who in 1856 migrated here with John L. May from Green County, Alabama. John later donated a portion of the land for the courthouse. Nathaniel O'Neal was [a] former slave of Mr. and Mrs. C.B. O'Neal, who came, as near as we can tell, from Green County, Georgia. We're not quite sure when that migration took place. If you can help us with that information, we'd sure love to have it.

Then I'd just like to tell you once again that the article on Mable's research and homestead is on our website. There are printouts of the articles back there, so please be sure to take one before you go. I'm going to turn you over to Mrs. Mable Sims.

MS: I'd like to praise God Almighty for just giving me this chance and opportunity to be here. It is such an honor and such a pleasure to see such wonderful people that have been a part of my life for the past fifteen, going on twenty, years. I just want to say a word of prayer. Most Holy Father, I thank you, Father for this opportunity. Thank you, Heavenly Father, for allowing me to give me this chance to speak to this delegation and to this audience. Thank you, Heavenly Father, for allowing me to get familiar with the ins and outs and the ups and the downs. I thank you, Heavenly Father, for allowing me this opportunity today. In Jesus' name, amen.

Where do I begin? What can I say? How did I get started? Words cannot convey to you the things that have been imbedded into me, imbedded since I was a child. Sitting at my grandmother's table or sitting on the front porch, or rocking in the rocking chair, or swinging in the swing and looking at my grandmother Precious, Precious O'Neal. Where do I begin of just letting you know what I received just by sitting, looking, and listening to the conversation that my grandmother—what she told me? How she told me about certain things—

I wanted to know what was going on in my life. At the age of five years old, I was sitting in my mother's house after she fixed breakfast for me, and my sister, three years old,

went to the wooden stove. Beside the wooden stove, there was a wooden box of ladder splinters. My mother had just lit the stove, and my sister and I were sitting down. She took the ladder splinter, and she stuck it into the wood stove, right down where the flames, where the sparkle was. She pulled it out, and she put it back down into the box. Mind you, I was five years old.

After a while, the fire started raging. Smoke started coming. My mother had gone down to my aunt's house to get fitted for a dress that she was going to make her. When the fire started getting bigger, I grabbed my sister's hand. I ran to the front porch, and I called for my mamma. My grandmother said, "Go back in the house; your mama will be back after a while."

I was an obedient child. I turned from the screen porch. The door went into our bedroom, and hanging on the walls, and hanging on a string was pastel, small girl's hangers. The dresses were starched and beautifully ironed. The smoke and the fire was coming and raging through the house. I took my sister, and I went into our bedroom and shut the door. The fire got stronger. The smoke got thicker. I took my sister's hand and pulled her into the closet. The fire still got stronger. I was trying to protect myself and protect my sister. [I was] five years old.

Finally, after a while, Mr. Waldo, my grandfather's boss man, came to pick up my grandfather, and he said, "Bubba, Willy, you better go. Your daughter's house looks like it's on fire." Well, they all came running, and as they were trying to get the window open, we went further back into the closet. They were trying to reach for us, and we still went back as far as we could go. They had to break the window; they had to come in. They had to retrieve us. We came to safety. The house was destroyed. My grandmother, Precious, took us into her house. [I was] five years old.

My grandmother used to sit on the front porch and higher learnt my alphabets. I'm getting ready to do a book, to write a book on "Precious Precious ABC," slavery style. She showed me and taught me how to say them, and I don't think anyone else—if anyone in this building and in this room can tell me if you've ever heard of it, I want to know. She talked about an apple, and she said, "A an apple, B bit it, C cut it, D divided it, E earned it, F fought for it, G got it, H hid, I intended for it, J jumped at it, K kicked it, L longed for it, M moaned for it, N knotted at it, O opened it, P peeped at it, Q quartered it, R will run for it, S sought for it, T turned for it, U earned it, V visited, W, X, Y, Z gazed on." If any one of you all have ever heard of it, let me know.

(laughter)

God spared my life for a reason. I kept wondering why things were happening to me. Prior to five years old, my great-grandfather, Nathaniel O'Neal, a very proud individual, worked hard for whatever he had. Whatever he had on that hundred and sixty acres, he worked hard for it. Prior to the house burning down, he was outside chopping wood. He didn't hear me. He didn't see me. As he raised his axe up, I walked in front of him, and the axe came down. Yes, my skull here was busted. I'm here to tell you.

I asked my mother, I said, "Mama? Why? How did they stop the bleeding?"

She said, "Oh, baby, we just went up into the edge of the porch and just grabbed up a handful of spider webs and put it up there." See, we lived by nature. We lived by nature out there in those woods. At certain times of the season, it's so dark back there, nobody comes back there. I can tell you one thing; I had one of the most lovely experiences that I ever had.

My grandmother, she was high yellow. She was so high yellow that I couldn't tell the difference. She had freckles. She had blue eyes, and she had snow white pretty hair. I used to go up to my grandmother and say, "Grandmama, why are your eyes so blue?"

She would look at me and say, "Oh, gal, go on and leave me alone."

That didn't stop me. I was very persistent. I would go up to my grandmother again, and I would look at her, and look at every word she said—it just soaked inside of me like a sponge. Every word that proceeded out of her mouth looked like it just went inside my brain and just stuck in there. I would go back up to her again, and I would say, "Grandmama, why is your skin different from mine?"

She said, "I done told you one time, gal, you better go on and leave me alone."

Well, I just kept asking, kept asking until I just said, "Well, I'll forget it; I'll find out from somebody else."

I started persisting, going to my grandfather, Willy O'Neal. He's the father of my mother, Elnora. I would go up to him, and I would ask my granddaddy. He said, "Mable, I done told you to leave me alone, now."

I said, "Okay, I'll just leave him alone. I'll go over here a little bit, and I'll let him cool off, and I'll go back again."

I would go back to my granddaddy, and he said, "Mable, I done told you now, you better leave me alone."

And I was so persistent, I was so persistent. So one day, I was thinking my granddaddy had done cooled down and everything. I went back up to him again. I said, "Granddaddy—" He just balled that little fist up and hit me upside the head. They didn't have no child abuse during that time.

(laughter)

They didn't know anything about child abuse at that time. And down on the ground I went.

My Aunt Estella, she came running out. She said, "Bubba, you done killed my child! You done killed my child!"

He said, "She'll be all right."

But I still wanted to know. I still wanted to know who was this, and who was Grandpa Hampton, and who was Uncle Arthur St. Clair, and Uncle John, and Uncle James. I wanted to know who were these people? And why one side of my family was all this color and why the other side over here was my color. And I'm saying, "Wait a minute now. Something here is wrong."

We would go to a family reunion, have a little cook out, go over to Altamonte Springs; or either we would go over to Orlando or we would go to Lakeland, and that side is over on this side. And then we have this one—but [there] was so much love there. So much love, so much caring was there. It just soaked in me.

I wanted to know who was involved in all of this. "Where did you come from?" I wanted to know that. They started telling me about Antonio St. Clair, a runaway slave, a mulatto, dressed up as a woman and coming down from Lower Peace Tree, Alabama, and living with the Seminole Indians. Yes, with the Seminoles. I have a book at home that is from 1820, a powwow book. My great-grandfather, Hampton St. Clair, was a medicine man. He's a medicine man for the family. As I started getting interested in it, and as they sat down and they started telling me all the good things that my grandfather [had] done.

You know, back then there was no doctor that they could go to. He was the only medicine man that they had, and the only doctor. He would heal the ones that were burnt with fire; he would talk the fire out. I have salves that he gave recipes to my great grandmother, Aggie Robinson. They still work today. Black snake root. Camphor. There's so many different things that I have and so many different things that my grandfather [had] done, recipes that he has. I kept pursuing and kept pursuing.

And as I grew older, finished high school at Moton¹ in 1963, I proceeded to go to St. Petersburg. I had to come back. I met so many people along my way. This is a part, two part, three part, four. Can't tell you all. It's just too much, but I met people that wanted to learn and wanted to know. I have books and books, and research, and who this person is, and who that person is. I have the house still standing. Still standing. My husband and I went in there. We lay down and went to sleep. That's just how peaceful it is.

Ernest Sims: You slept! It was musky and (inaudible) in the bed!

(laughter)

MS: (laughs) Because we were—I know that the time is very limited, but just to give you a little idea of what I learned—and believe it or not, I didn't know anything about

¹ Moton School was an all-black school in Hernando County. There is currently a Moton Elementary School in Hernando County, but in a different location.

prejudice. I didn't even know what the word was. My neighbors were white. Roy and Joyce Hatcher. They were my friends, they were our friends. We were all together. When they didn't have and we had, we gave to them. When they had and we didn't have, they gave to us. There was no hatred there. There was no bitterness there. It was just like say, two peas in a pod. When Mother Hatcher was getting ready to have her twins, who did she come to? She came to my Grandmother Precious. Grandmother Precious talked about the Snow family. It could go on, and on, and on.

I just want to let you know that I'm not going to let my dream die. People like you with caring hearts and minds are going to help me fulfill my O'Neil-St. Clair village. It's going to happen. Do you know why? Because I'm not going to let it die. I'm not going to let it die because my family was families that were raised in blood, sweat, and tears, and they died.

I'm the chosen one, Mable Sims. People said, "Mable, what you going to do with all that old stuff? Why don't you just go and sell it?" Every piece in that household was from the Sears & Roebuck Catalog in the middle 1890s. Every piece of stitch they stitched on those quilts—two trunks full of quilts that my grandmother sat in the middle of the night and quilted. I can't let my dream die. I can't let it die, because God chose me to fulfill the dream of my ancestors. I thank you all so very much. As I said before, there's part two, part three, and part four.

TC: What a wonderful story. And there obviously is a part two, three and four.

MS: Yes, there is!

TC: One thing that Mable did not get a chance to tell you—some of you may or may not know this. But her great-grandfather, Hampton, and his brother, Arthur, were probably the two most prominent black men in Hernando County in the late 1860s, early 1870s. Well respected by the entire community, very well thought of. And there's a long story about that.

MS: Yes, there is.

TC: And one of these days maybe Mable will tell us about that.

MS: That's right.

TC: Any questions that you want to ask any of these young ladies? They will be here for a little bit to spotlight—I mean—

(laughter)

TC: —attempt to tell stories. They brought some marvelous material with them to show you and share. And I know they will answer any questions. Some of these photographs have never been seen outside the family. So you might want to look at—

[Someone raises a hand] Yes?

Andrew Huse: I've got a question for Mable. You mentioned the Snow family briefly. We have two members of them right here. Precious, of course, was tied in with the Ederingtons, both who lived in Chinsegut Hill at one time or another. Can you just tell us a little more about your family's association with those two families?

MS: Well, the only thing that my grandmother told me, she said, "Baby, I'm going to tell you some of the good." I'm going to tell you what she said. She said, "I'm going to tell you some of the good ones and some of the bad ones. The Snow family is the best set of white families that you ever wanted to meet." Praise God. [She] said that, "They were the best—they were the best people."

My grandmother, like I said, every word she said—it was just like I was a little child, and a little sponge. And I sponged [up] everything she said. And that's when I met with them and they would say, "Precious O'Neal," they said; "we have three or four old Preciouses in our family."

I'd say, "Well, okay, then this had to be." Because, see, I don't know who taught my grandmother those ABCs. Someone had to teach it to her. Someone had to teach it—and that is where—now, I'm assuming, and I believe this is where her name came from. Because I don't know anyone else around here named Precious. She was close there with them, with the main family and all of that. So we haven't got the real—we're just searching. We're searching, and if my grandmother's name is a part of one of the best families here in Hernando County, yes, I will say yes. This is what she profoundly—she was very adamant about it. She said they are the best ones here.

She told me a couple more names; they said they are good names. They are good, good people; they are good people. And that's where, I know in my gut feeling, in my gut heart, is that's where Hampton St. Clair and Sally St. Clair. My grandmother Sally, when she stood up, her hair was here. [It was] coal black.

We haven't got into the Seminole side yet. We haven't even touched the St. Clair side yet. The O'Neal side is so big. I didn't realize that this was going to be so big. I want to show you something. They kept everything. I think I'm right in their footsteps. I keep everything, too. [Reaches to show audience something].

But after moving back home on the farmstead, I had a little run down trailer. One afternoon, the spirit said, "Go to the old house." See, my grandfather lived in the back room, and people used to come to him. They would come in with sickness, colds, flues, cuts, and burns. He would go to the east end of the house. The stone is still there where he would sit and chant.

My grandmother would say, "He would chant, chant, chant, chant, chant, chant, chant, chant, chant, chant." He would take this [shows audience].

This right here was the beginning of my venture. This right here is something that you may never see again. This is so old. People tell me, "You mean to tell me you're going to let everybody know!"

I said, "No, they're not going to come and touch this." Hampton St. Clair is here. You can come and look at it.

This right here, it looks like an arrowhead. On here is a map. It tells you of the three Seminole wars. On here are notches. Each day something happened, but one day is different than the other. You can see where it is in a deeper cutout. On that day, something happened on that day.

How do I know this? God changed me from Brooksville Head Start to Bushnell Head Start. In September they usually have a fall festival. He came to me and said, "You're going to meet someone today."

I'm looking and saying, "Okay, all right." This stone was on my grandmother's dresser, laying up there just as pretty as you please.

When I walked in there, I was led, picked this up. Tell me how my granddaddy used to chant. Once he finished chanting, he would go out into the woods. He would get the root. He would take the leaves. He would take the bark. He would take the berries, and he would take them and mix them together. He would have different potions here. Different things for this and for that. Whenever someone come with that ailment, he'd give it to them. They'll get up a couple more days, and they'll go home.

Out there where I live, the word—the study of plants—

Member of Audience: Botany.

MS: A botany? Botany.

Member of Audience: Botany.

MS: Botany? B-o-t-a—

Member of Audience: n-y.

MS: Okay. Well, that word, God gave to me, and I need to find someone that knows about plants, because those plants are still there. There's the mud and shank is there. There's the black snake root.

Unknown Voice: Did you ever hear of John the Conqueror root?

MS: Oh, please, my God.

Unknown Voice: We had a bottle of it—

MS: No, no, no.

(laughter)

MS: No, let me show John the Conqueror root. This here was my grandfather. My aunt said, "Baby, you want to know about my family, your family? I'm going to tell you. There is some good, some bad, and some indifferent."

You hear me when I tell you; this here is John the Conqueror root. This in here is John the Conqueror root. He would have three pieces of silver down in here and would take it with him. Now, no one will come up to the St. Clair hill, because they knew my granddaddy did not play. You better be right when you come there, because if you come wrong, you're going to leave right.

(laughter)

MS: I'm telling you the truth. This right here, another thing that I have here, is Seminole. [Mocks someone questioning her] "How do you know your grandmommy is Seminole? How do you know?" If you take a picture—take a look at my grandmother and look at the nose. Look at the jewelry that's around her neck. Look at the feather that is hanging from her ear. You'll know definitely.

I went to an expert over in Lacoochee—Trail Lachoochee—Mrs. Mitty Woods. See, (inaudible) is smiling. She is an authority on that. I took it there to her. I've been traveling here, and I've been traveling all over trying to find, trying to find what this was.

On that particular Saturday, I went to the festival, and I didn't have anything to put this in. I usually would carry it close to me. As I approached this lady, she was passing out brochures about a powwow. I said, "This must be the lady." I went up to her and said, "Ma'am? May I see you for a minute, please?"

She said, "Yes. We are having a powwow."

I'd never been to a powwow in my life. When I took this out and when laid this in her and showed it to her, she said, "Oh, my God. Oh, my God."

And I'm standing saying, "What is she talking about?"

"Oh, my God." She stepped back. She said, "Ma'am, do you know what you have?"

I says, "No, ma'am."

She said, "You have the missing link."

I still got puzzled. I said, "Missing link? What missing link?"

She said, "You need to go to the powwow."

I said, "What powwow?"

She said, "You need to go, and you need to see Buffalo. You need to see him now." And I had just entered into—they blocked off the streets. I had just entered into the street to go meet my parents and my students. She said, "Ma'am, you need to go now!"

I jumped, and she said, "Here's the directions."

I turned and went on down to the powwow. And y'all excuse my expression, I was a little dark right in person there. I felt so good and comfortable there. I didn't feel frightened. Everybody was, "Hi, how are you?"

I said, "May I see Buffalo?"

"He's right over there, he's right over there."

When I got to Buffalo, I said, "Buffalo, they sent me to you."

He said, "Yep."

And my hand—I said, "I have something I need to give you, let you look at."

He took it, and he looked at it. He said, "Mmm hmm—mmm-hmm—mmm-hmm. Come back and see me tomorrow."

I said, "Come back and see me tomorrow!" You know how inquisitive I am. "Come back tomorrow—I want to know now! I don't want to nothing tomorrow!"

He said, "Come back to me tomorrow."

That was on a Saturday. I took my family and went back. When I got there, there was about six or seven women. They said, "Mable?"

I said, "Yes?"

"Could you come with us?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, "Do you have the stone with you?"

I said, "Yes, ma'am."

She says, "Could we see it?"

I said, "Yes."

I handed it to her, and she said, "Can I ask you a question?" She said, "Are you on your moon?"

"On my what?" My eyes were kind of— "What? On my what?"

She explained it to me a little deeper, and I said, "Yes, ma'am."

She said, "Well, ma'am, you can't go in the roundhouse."

"I can't go in the roundhouse?"

I see some [in the audience] nodding their heads saying yes, they understand what I'm talking about.

She said, "You and your children, you all just enjoy yourself. Just enjoy the dancing and enjoy the venues, and eat some of the food."

And so I said, "Okay." I didn't feel scared. I didn't feel lost. I felt comfortable. I did not feel that I was in a strange place.

Okay, well, after we went and enjoyed the dancing and looking at all the artwork, jewelry, and all of that, by the time we came back, they gave me the stone. They said, "You have a good evening. You can go back and see Buffalo now."

I went back to him, and said, "Well? What's the verdict, Buffalo?"

He said, "Where you live at, woman?"

I said, "I live in Brooksville."

He said, "Mmm—where you live at?"

I said, "I live in Twin Lake right off of the Pasco/Hernando County line."

"Where do you work at?"

I said, "I work at Head Start. I work in Bushnell."

"I live in Bushnell. I want you to come by my house tomorrow."

And I'm saying, "Come by your house?"

"I want you to come by my house tomorrow."

I said, "Well, tell me where you live."

I went to his house. He said, "Woman, I want you to know everything that I know."

I said, "Buffalo, that's scary. My grandmother was scary, because when my granddaddy wanted her to learn everything, she said no!"

He said, "I want you to know everything."

I would go to his house just about every other day. One day he said, "I want you to go with me."

I said, "Wait a minute, Buffalo. Now I'm a black woman, right? And you're a white man."

"Don't you call me white man. I'm a Native American, and you better recognize me for who I am."

I said, "I'm sorry."

So, I got in his car, and he took me to the Palakacaha where my ancestors—where they lived. Where they lived.

And as I was coming back, he said, "Woman, I want to marry you."

I said, "Oh, my God. Oh, no, Buffalo. Honey, I know—this is off limits here now."

He said, "I want to marry you." Now, mind you, he's seventy-eight years old, and I'm forty years old.

I said, "Buffalo, no."

But he took me, one evening he looked at my hands and says, "You're going out west. You're going out west."

I said, "I don't have anybody living out west."

He said, "Oh, you're going out west, young lady."

I said, "I don't have nobody."

He said, "Okay, all right."

The next time I went, he said, "When you're riding on the road on [Sumter County Road] 476, you're going to see a bird coming, and it's going to touch the hood of your car."

As I was riding along the road on 476 going on down, I had forgotten all about what he said, [and] all of a sudden that bird came and touched the hood of my car. I said, "Oh, my God." I got really scared then. He wants me to know everything that he knows.

We went through so many things with Buffalo. He was just a wonderful individual. He passed away. He came out when I got married. When I met my husband and told him who he was, I said, "Buffalo, tell me about it."

"He's a good old man. He's a hard working man. He has a good heart. He's a good natured man."

I said, "Okay, Buffalo." So I went and got married.

I see [someone in the audience] smiling, because that day when we got married, we did an African wedding out to the house. And Buffalo was there. He was kind of ailing and in his wheel chair, his portable wheelchair. And he came out and he blessed the land, and he blessed my husband. And he blessed us.

I tell you, he came back and visited my husband; he came back and visited him in a dream. When he died, we found out he died. He really just wanted to show off a little bit. I think that's what he was doing. Because my husband had a dream he was a white stag up on top of a hill and a rock, and a black stag was down. There was white, clear water running all the way down. When we found out Buffalo had a big cyst in his back, he laid down to sleep, and it dropped off, and all the liquids in his body drained out, down through the mattress, on the floor.

ES: Can I tell it?

MS: Yes.

ES: It was like stair step rocks, and [there] was water running down. It was like a white horse standing up and a black horse laying down. It looked like his stomach was cut open, but there was no blood. I woke up and told my wife.

So about—what, three months later?—we went to the lady's house. She said, "He's died." They found out that they found him dead; that all the liquid had drained out of his body. There was no blood, just a puddle of water under the bed. So I saw the water.

MS: You did.

ES: Yes.

MS: And whenever, whenever a bird comes—

ES: And come past the car—

MS: And comes past—I say, "Hello, Buffalo."

Thank you all so very much. Like I said, "Part two, part three, and part four—"

(applause from audience)

TC: I just wanted to mention to y'all too—in the future, if, for this get together, if you'd ever like to come on a field trip to Mable's and bring a sack lunch, we'll make you some lemonade and take you through the house. So keep that in mind if you want to do that.

[To Mable] Thank you so much for having us.

MS: Thank you very much.

TC: Thank you very much, folks, see you next time, three months from now. Drive careful. Don't forget to pay your bill and leave a tip for the young lady.

(laughter)

TC: Good to see all of y'all.

end of interview