

Sarasota County Water Atlas
Oral History Project
New College of Florida — Fall 2015



Interview with: Edward E. James II
Conducted and transcribed in October 2015
Interviewer: Haley L. Jordan

Dr. James has been an active civil rights leader in the Newtown community since he was a college student at Florida A&M University. He has been the producer and host of the locally-produced television show “Black Almanac” for 38 years, and served as a columnist and governmental reporter for the *Sarasota Journal* newspaper. He was a writer/associate producer of the television show “Positively Black,” and also worked for the *New York Post*. He has received a President’s Award, a Lifetime Service Award and a Freedom Award from the Sarasota County NAACP, and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Sarasota African-American Chamber of Commerce.

Topics: Beach desegregation in Sarasota, library desegregation in Sarasota, Edward James’s family history

Jordan: So I thought maybe we could just start by you telling me about your childhood. I don’t know if you were born in Sarasota or Florida. It didn’t say on the website.

James: I am Edward E. James II. I am an only child. My mother was an only child. I have three youngsters. I shouldn’t call them youngsters because they are all adults now, but to a father they’ll always be my youngsters.

I’ll start with my grandparents. My grandparents Jack and Mary Emma Jones. Let’s go back just a little.

I’m an only child. My mother, Annie Blue McElroy, is one of the first four graduates of Booker High School. She always said that half of her class became teachers, educators. That’s two. She and Martina Reily, who was the other teacher out of the four. The other two students were Nacomi Williams who became a registered nurse, and her and her brother Al who became an insurance executive in Philadelphia, that was in 1935, the first graduating class from Booker High School.

My mother was only child. Her parents Jack and Mary Emma Jones both were domestic workers. They had, my grandparents, had several businesses. They had a restaurant, they had a taxi service and they became entrepreneurs, after early years in their lives as domestic workers. My grandparents owned the first telephone in the black community and it was in their business. My grandparents also ran a Western Union substation in the community. It was a regular Western Union office. And during those early years, there was a lack of paved streets and addresses, and

should I forget to tell you later on in the interview, ask me about the street addresses. When a telegram would come for someone in the community, it would usually be addressed to “Haley Jordan, Newtown.” And my grandparents knew almost if not everybody in the community. Sometimes in those early days when people whose families were in other states and other cities and there was a death in the family or emergency and they were trying to reach somebody. They knew the family was a black family, and if they knew the relative lived in Sarasota sometimes they would call the Sarasota sheriffs office. The sheriffs office at the time was located in the original county office building on Ringling and Bird. And they would send an officer out to my grandparents’ restaurant and ask them. They would say “There’s a family called the Jordans, they live in Colorado and they have a daughter whose name is Haley who lives in Newtown and we have this phone number. It’s very important that Haley call her mother or father in Colorado. Can you help us?” And they would say, “Sure, I know Haley. I can tell you where she lives or we will get the number to her.”

They performed that kind of service, and every driver’s license sold—I’m sorry, renewed, not sold. The original test had to be done for drivers’ licenses at the courthouse. There was a highway officer stationed at the courthouse and on X days you came to do a written test and a driving test. But when it was time for renewal, for convenience you could come to my grandparents’ restaurant and get your driver’s license renewed.

My grandparents both were members of many black community organizations. My grandmother was chairman of the Newtown TV unit and received a citation from President Roosevelt. For that, if you remind me, you should take the note to remind me to ask me about that, and I’ll get it for you so you can scan that at a later date. During World War II, my grandparents, they would distribute government material for members of our community in case of an air raid. I don’t think we ever had a real one but there were some practices.

My grandparents were very, very active in many things in the community. My grandmother was a member of the Colored Women’s Service Club. That club of ladies sought permission to get some barracks moved to the site of Sarasota Memorial Hospital because blacks could not go to the hospital or stay in the hospital because of the stupidity of segregation. So initially when blacks were allowed to go to Sarasota Memorial Hospital they stayed in a separate wing which was the military barracks. Speaking of the military, what is now Sarasota Bradenton Airport was Sarasota Airfield. It was an army airfield in the days gone by. At the end of the war the facility was decommissioned, the Black Women’s Club got in touch with the Department of Defense, that was the area that had the responsibility for the airfield prior to the decommissioning. I’m taking ahead of myself, there was no service club for black soldiers or airmen who were stationed at the Sarasota Airfield. The Black Women’s Club petitioned the Department of Defense to build a facility in Newtown for the black servicemen. I think I have a picture of that also.

In addition, after the base was decommissioned after the war, they asked the Department of Defense if they could have that building, the one in the service club, for a recreational center for black children. And that’s how the first recreational center for black children in Newtown came about. And that same site now is Robert L Taylor Community Center. If you were my age, which is 76, and you went to the recreational center as a child, we called it the USO [United Service Organizations]. It was no longer USO, it morphed over the years and the ladies were able to get

the City of Sarasota to do something about having to put a paid recreational leader there to help with the maintenance of it. Later it became the Newtown Recreational Center so another generation of young folk began to call it "the rec" for short. Later it became Newtown Community Center as it expanded to do many things, that same building.

When there was no library for blacks in Sarasota, this was before there was a unified library system, the city owned the library. That library was located on US [Highway] 41. Now it's called the art something fine arts center, it's a small place in front of the Van Wezel just west of the exhibition hall.

Well, if a black wanted to get a book from the library, you had to go to the Newtown Community Center, to the town rec center. Well, someone from the the Newtown community center will call the library and say, "We have a student at the high school or just a citizen who wants a book on water conservation," so somebody from the library would take two or three books that they thought might answer what they were looking for and send it out three or four, five or six, seven, eight, whenever the next trip was, days later to the rec.

Well, that changed. I'm happy to say I was part of that change. During the Christmas of 1957, during winter break from Florida A&M University, I came home and three other people who were high school classmates, Booker High School class of 1957 was our graduation date, and one of them was Ralph Honor who was also a student at Florida A&M. I said, "Let's go to the library and check out some books." And they said, "Why do you want to go? You know we can't get any books from library." I said, "Well, let's go see," and they said, "Look, I don't want to do this." They would always say no. My friends and I would come up with these various kinds of ideas. "Now, if they say we can't, we're going to leave, right?" I said, "Right." "Now, you promised now, we're not going to confront anybody." I said, "No, no, no."

So Roosevelt Ball, A.W. Ball, Ralph Honor and myself, we went down and off trail to the library. And we walked in, there was a counter just beyond the front door, kind of an information counter. We walked up and stood there for a minute, and then the librarian came out and said, "Can I help you?" I said, "Yes, we are going to check out some books." Proudly we said, "We are college students, we need to do some research over the holidays." She said, "Have you tried the Newtown library?" The Newtown Community Center, the library there. I said, "That's not a library. That's a joke." And my two partners were getting a little edgy and Ralph was the closest to me, he kicked me on the leg behind the counter.

And I said, "It is our plan to check out some books today and ma'am you should call whoever you need to call so that that can happen." And then she said, "Hold on just a minute." And she called a number; we didn't know where she was calling to. One of my friends said, "She's probably calling the police and we need to go, we need to go right now." And I said, "Well, I'm not going to go right now, just hold on for another bit." And they said, "You promised, you promised us we would leave." And I just said, "Just hold on a minute. Maybe this is finally the day."

And then there were some things like, "Yes, no, no," to whoever she was talking to and we later found out that she was talking to the city manager, at that time Ken Thompson. She handed the phone to me and said, "Mr. Thompson wants to talk to you," and so I said, "Hello?" He said,

“Hi, I’m Ken Thompson. Who am I talking to?” I said, “I’m Ed James.” He said, “Do I know you?” I say, “No, no, Mr. Thompson I don’t think so and I don’t know you.” He said, “Well I’m the city manager. I understand you want to check out some books from the library.” I said, “Yes.”

“And I understand that you didn’t go to the Newtown library.” I said, “There is no Newtown library. You mean those two shelves of old magazines and books with torn pages in the community center?” He said, “Do your parents know that you are there?” I said no. “What would they say if they knew you were there demanding service?” I said, “They would probably say it’s about time.”

He said, “Well would you come down and talk to me? I’m at City Hall. Do you know where City Hall is?” I said no. He says, “Do you know where the old wooden city pier is?” I said yes. He said, “Well we are a building at the back of that pier and I’d like to have a conversation about that.” I said, “Okay, I’ll be right there.” And the librarian looked to be relieved from what she was hearing when I gave her the phone back.

And then my friends said, “Where do you say we are going now?” I said, “We’re going to City Hall.” “Where is City Hall?” I said, “The City Hall, by the pier, you know.” A.W. said, “I’m not going.” He said, “They’re probably going to drown us there.” I said “Oh come on that’s never gonna happen.” So he decided he wasn’t going to go and he walked back to Newtown from what would be about Ninth Street where the library was down on [US Highway] 41. Ralph said, “Well, tell you what, I’m going with A.W., so you can tell us what happens when you get back, if you get back.” And they walked because I had the car and I was driving. I went and that day I met Ken Thompson. For those who may be reading or listening to this, and not aware the first City Hall was where Marina Jack is now and that was a wooden structure, not the fancy concrete structure that rises out of Sarasota Bay now.

I sat down and talked with him and he said, “Where are your friends?” I said, “Well, some of them had something to do so they went on back.” And we had probably about a 15-minute talk and he says, “Okay, go back to the library and get your books now.” And I guess he told her it was okay if we went back. So I thought, now I get to legitimately check out a book, and she gave me the equivalent of a card and I told her what I was looking for.

I don’t even remember what it is at this point. And she went back in and helped me find it and I went on back to my friends and said, “We can go to the library now, no thanks to you.” And they said, “Why you always fussin’ with somebody about something? They’re going to kill you one day.” I said, “But it wasn’t today.” And that’s how the library system became integrated.

And over the years I developed, from that day on, a very good relationship with manager Thompson. When there are issues in the community, long after I’d come back to the community as an adult, when there were issues of things going on, I would come down to City Hall and ask to see him. And he was one of the longest serving city managers anywhere in the country at that time and he was in a new building which is located on First Street now. And I would go and I would say “Mr. Thompson... And this this this, and you got to get it straightened out.” And he said, “Calm down, calm down. Let me...” he’d say, “Let me get Mr. Jordan in here and Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones” or something like that. And then he would say, “Gentlemen, do you know

Ed James? Well Ed James this is Mr. Jordan, Mr. Smith, and Mr. Jones.” And then, “This is not happening in Newtown and the city has a responsibility to do it. He’d say, “Ed says this, and I believe that this is correct. I want you to get a report on and come back to me and if what you are saying is true, we will correct it.”

And then they would leave, and then I would say, “Thank you, Mr. Thompson,” and I would leave. Now, I had many such discussions with Mr. Thompson over the years and my position was always the same, I was pretty fiery. During that period, I’d come and he’d have a meeting with the appropriate people and then I’d make my point and if it doesn’t seem like it’s going the way I want it to go and then he’d say, “Okay, thank you for coming by.” I’d say, “No, Mr. Thompson,” and he’d say, “Just just remember the library.” And that became our code if he said ‘remember the library’ in any of those discussions that meant he was gonna take care of it, he was going to get it done. If he didn’t say that and we ended the discussion, that meant he was not gonna do it and I would have to continue to fight with him about it.

I like to think of Ken Thompson as a very, very kind person who’s ahead of his time and made changes for the right reasons as he saw fit, because I know just because I thought it should be, didn’t make it so. But I also believed he always had an open door and I would get a fair hearing and someone asked me once how would I describe Ken Thompson. I’d say, “I guess he was a benevolent dictator.” And they say, “Why would you say that?” And I’d say, “You figure it out.”

He was a fine man. Now I could talk to you about many other things, I’m sure some of the other people talked about it, the integration of the beaches. And Mr. Neil Humphrey who owned the place called *Humphrey’s Sundries* for many many years at the corner of Osprey and Dr. MLK Way in the heart of Newtown, but I remember it before it was Dr. MLK Way it was 27th Street. I also remember when it was an unpaved road and was 33rd Street. Mr. Humphrey was a little man in stature but a very, very fiery, God-fearing, kind person. And he led the fight to integrate the beaches in Sarasota and that initially. I’m trying to think who is a member of his cabinet... officer in the NAACP, the original branch of the NAACP, who is still alive. I believe Mrs. Prevail Carner Barber is the only person who’s alive today who was a member of the chartering branch of the NAACP in Sarasota County.

Shortly after the fight for the integration of the beaches came about, there was a young man, young at the time, Mr. John Henry Rivers. Moved his family from Mobile, Alabama to Sarasota looking for better opportunities. John passed away this past year, he was an ally and friend in most of the civil rights things that I did in this community. He was assistant to Mr. Humphrey during the time and when the beach caravans would go. And first thing that they would do, the way the city would fight us, a police car would come and say, “The beach is closed, everybody leave.” Well our folk would leave and as soon as we got across the Ringling Bridge the beach mysteriously reopened again.

But before the fight was over for the beaches, the city fathers saw the persistence of the NAACP and they said, “Look, how would you all feel about if we would build you a swimming pool at the Newtown Community Center and you wouldn’t have to go all the way to the beach.” We said, “Great idea, great. We would love to have a pool.” So we kept the caravans going and they said, “But we are making progress, we are building the pool.” “See, but you haven’t finished it yet, and you may stop.” And the caravans kept coming. Now the pool is finished, and we have

the dedication of the pool, so on this particular Sunday they had the dedication of the pool, the ribbon cutting, everybody was happy. Another caravan left the pool and we went to the beach again. And then they came to their senses because they were getting bad press.

And there's a very kind gentleman whose name was Ted Sperling. At a point he was a City Commissioner here and he was very, very progressive, and he said, "You know Sarasota is the most racist city in the nation," and that goes back in the '50s. And they proposed all kinds of things for us. They said they would give us the beach down in Venice behind the airport and that wasn't fit for a beach. It was very, very rocky. You had to walk over rocks to get to it. The only thing that resembled a beach was water, it had water. I also remember when the Skyway was built that leads from Manatee County to Pinellas County.

During that time— It's a funny thing how the thing that what we had most of, that God put here, man tried to regulate it to their own foolish ways. Initially, when the Skyway was built, there was a beach on the south side, which is Manatee County side, for black people. There was a beach on the north side, the Pinellas County side, for white people. So if you're black and you wanted to go to the beach, and you lived St. Petersburg or that side, you have to pay the toll and come across the Skyway Bridge to go to the black side of the beach. And if you're white and you lived in Manatee, Sarasota, anything south, and you want to go to the beach, you had to go across it to go to the other side.

I would like to think that that we made some progress but I things keep happening that tells me we still have a long way to go. I've talked about beaches and and some civic things. And we filed a lawsuit in 1972 *James v. the City of Sarasota* and the plaintiffs were James, that's me, and my friends John Rivers, and William Fred Jackson, who published the black newspaper, then the weekly newspaper, *The Bulletin*. He was a classmate of the class of '57, my classmate. And Sheila Sanders, a young lady who is a 1968 graduate of Sarasota County public school. And I say that too because... first the school district fought the integration of schools as long as it could until we got the federal government to intervene for them to integrate the schools, but they had boycotts before then. At Booker High School what they did—and I realized that she was, Sanders, was a member of the class of '68—I know that because public schools—the black class of Booker High School would have graduated in 1968, but after junior year they closed, temporarily closed, high school and divided up the black students depending upon where you live in the community. Some went to Sarasota High School and some went to Riverview. But they continued to show their love for Booker High School because they would have their black proms and their black events and this year, this year about a month ago they set up and celebrated their 40th or 50th anniversary of graduation, of graduating from high school. Riverview or Sarasota school district gave them diplomas that were signed. It's a beautiful diploma. My wife, who's a graduate of that class, has one that would be something that you might want to get it, anyway now getting back to the lawsuit at City Hall...

To change the election system at the time of the filing of the lawsuit in 1979, five different black folk ran nine times, some more than one time, for city commission and could never get elected because the city voted on race. Now how do you know that, you're not a mind reader. It's interesting that everybody, every time the black community always voted for their black candidate but they could never get into office because the city votes along racial lines. And the City Commission was comprised of five districts: one, two, three, four, five. People living on the

same street could just declare for a particular district and run. Our lawsuit *James v. Sarasota*, we were asking for five single-member districts. And we had asked the city for that so that they could do it themselves but never would, and this case rolled on for seven years. When we finally got to the point of having our day in court and the judge was setting a hearing, the city wanted to file what they called “an affirmative defense.” It’s where they admit that the election system is flawed but they could correct it and we said, “No, we want our day in court.”

And we had our day in court. And the judge in his infinite wisdom decided we didn’t need five single-member districts, but three single-member districts with one a majority minority district and we should be able to elect a commissioner. Three single-member districts and two at-large. When we got ready for the first election, we decided that we may not be able to win this election because while the district was 48% black, it was 52% white. The judge had said that most times when a black was on the ballot we would turnout in such high numbers we should be okay. So what we decided to do was prior to that election we advertise within the black community: anyone who wants to run for city commissioner in this coming election, we want you to let it be known. And we developed a plan pledge that we are going to have a mock election within the black community and whoever the black community selected, this candidate will be the unity candidate, from our community. And all those who said they would run, they agreed to that. However, Fredd Atkins, former mayor and former commissioner Atkins, won the election and became our first black elected city official. Now it’s important to know I went to those people and he was our unity candidate, based upon we had the election in a church with all the people who wanted to come and participate for the Newtown community, and he was selected. One candidate decided that he was going to run anyway. We said, “but you signed the agreement. Why are you going to run anyway?” He said, “Well, there’s some people downtown who want me to run.” I say, “That’s the problem. We’re trying to have representation from our community without dictates from downtown.” He said, “Well, I’m sorry but I’m gonna have to run anyway. I’m gonna run anyway.” And so what we found to be necessary was to expose the other candidate for what we believed he was, a traitor to the community. And Mr. Atkins won, and he served several terms as mayor and city commissioner. Two terms as mayor and then he said enough, he left, he didn’t run in election. Since that time, District 1 has always been represented by a black person.

I guess I was talking more about the community than I was talking about myself. Did I not cover the kind of stuff you want to me to cover?

Jordan: I mean, it’s about, you know, what you want to say, and just like also, there’s this project, but also it’s something for you to keep, for your kids to keep. So whatever you want to preserve, you can talk as much or as little about anything as you want. I like the community stuff.

James: What I tried to do is talk about the library. Because some folks think it’s just the way it is, this the way it’s always been, some folk will come and be here, and they’ll see a black commissioner or a black mayor and think that’s the way it’s always been. No, there was nothing without a fight. And we had to even threaten the city’s Federal Revenue Sharing funds to get blacks in the fire department.

I'm glad that you all are doing something that you believe is good for posterity, for everybody. Because I always believed that folk would do better if they knew better. But they don't understand.