



City of Alexandria
Office of Historic Alexandria
Alexandria Legacies
Oral History Program



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Interviewer: *Logan Wiley*

Transcriber: *Jo-Ann LaFon and Robert Colton*

Abstract: Shirley Sanderson Steele was born and raised in Alexandria. She recalls her childhood home, neighborhood and many African American owned businesses. While raising her family she completed and received her high school diploma. She and her second husband, Mr. Steele, also spend time talking about segregation in Alexandria, the struggle for civil rights including library sit-ins and the benefits of integration.

Table of Contents/Index

Tape: *Tape 1*

Side: *Side 1*

Minute	Counter	Page	Topic
<i>Not indicated</i>	001	3	Medical Care for African Americans During Segregation
		3	Childhood Home
		4	Early Schooling
		5	Neighborhood
		5	Segregation and Integration in Alexandria
		6	Black Businesses, Social Organizations and Churches
		9	Returning to School

Tape: *Tape 1*

Side: *Side 2*

Minute	Counter	Page	Topic
<i>Not indicated</i>		10	Family
		11	Segregation and Civil Rights in Alexandria

Medical Care for African Americans During Segregation	
Logan Wiley:	Were you born in Alexandria and if so, were you born at a hospital or at home?
Shirley Steele:	I was born in Alexandria and, I believe, I was born in Alexandria Hospital. At that time, it was located on Duke Street.
L.W.:	And what was the medical care like for black people at that time?
Shirley Steele:	As far back as I can remember, we had to go to a clinic and the clinic was located on Columbus Street—the side entrance of the hospital. You did have to wait in line—not only blacks, but there were a few, as we would say, poor white people that went to the clinic and you had to wait in line.
L.W.:	Were services back then segregated?
Shirley Steele:	Yes, they were...I'm not sure, but I did think I saw some white people at that clinic.
L.W.:	Did you feel that the medical care was adequate, or could it have been better for you?
Shirley Steele:	I guess I would say adequate. I haven't had too many illnesses, so I guess my mother kept me in good condition. So, I would say it was adequate.
Childhood Home	
L.W.:	What was your Alexandria address? And describe your house.
Shirley Steele:	My Alexandria address and my first remembrance was on Henry Street --- 312 ½ North Henry. My first one was 400. My mother often told me about that, but I don't remember [it]. My first remembrance was 312 ½ North Henry Street and the traffic was two ways. And you had to be careful going across this street. And sometimes they would send us to the store and you had to look both ways. Traffic was very fast. The neighbors were friendly and if you didn't behave yourself, you got a spanking and they told your parents and you got another one. They looked out for each other. I like that. We were close-knit.
L.W.:	What did the houses look like?
Shirley Steele:	The houses looked like this one—wall to wall. And I don't think I've gone very far from when I first started. You see the different addresses on my sheet I gave you, but it seems like I'm right back home. I didn't go very far away. The houses were close then. We tried to help each other—be concerned, without being nosy.
L.W.:	Tell me about some of the important events of your childhood and describe the neighborhood in which you grew up.
Shirley Steele:	I grew up at 312 ½ North Henry Street. I could remember from ages 6 through 12. My first kindergarten was on Oronoco Street at Mrs. Martha Miller, right around the corner. And across from Mrs. Martha Miller, it was the Hopkins' House where it first started and

	<p>then it moved to Princess Street. It just seemed like the teachers were caring and I liked going there. This one lady—her hands were so soft and she smelled so sweet. And I just enjoyed her. I was raised up like in a single environment. We all lived together—my mother, my aunt, my grandmother. My father wasn't there; my father and mother weren't married, but you felt secure. You didn't feel like you were looked down upon and it just made you feel secure going to the Hopkins House. It was a group of teachers. I think they started it and you learned how to do things. It was very nice. I liked it.</p>
<p>Early Schooling</p>	
<p>L.W.:</p>	<p>Tell me about your elementary school.</p>
<p>Shirley Steele:</p>	<p>The elementary school...At that time, I was going to Charles Houston. Charles Houston is right up the street on Wythe Street and I think--if I remember—it had it from the first grade to about the fifth grade. When you got in the sixth grade, as blacks you had to go out to Lyles Crouch School. It's different now—Lyles Crouch.</p> <p>But ...the teachers were friendly and I will not forget Mrs. Helen Day—the post office is named after her. Every year at Christmas time, she would read us a Christmas Carol. They made you behave yourself. Not like the teachers having to beat you. Most of the kids, they behaved themselves. You get a few boys go around with other hard-headed boys and they would fight, or fight boys from Arlington. But I tried to stay with those who obey because I knew my mother would spank me and I didn't want a beatin' and I behaved. But we had good times.</p> <p>Right around here where these houses are on Pendleton Street around the corner, it was something called the USO. And they had recreation there for teenagers. And then 'The Berg' (where the Alexandria Housing Authority is), they used to have dances there -- between 6 and 12, that's the age I'm talking about. When you got around 12, it seems like you were getting a step higher. You had to watch yourself, and boys and things. My mother would tell us to come home and I tried to obey her.</p>
<p>L.W.:</p>	<p>What was your education like at Lyles-Crouch?</p>
<p>Shirley Steele:</p>	<p>Just about the time I got to the 5th or 6th grade, Parker Gray was finished and it was some shift in the school and I didn't have to go to Lyles-Crouch. All the rest of them that age—I don't know what year that was-- but they finished Parker Gray and they was beginning to open up other areas and so the children didn't have to go out to Lyles-Crouch anymore. I was glad because I thought that was too far to walk across Washington Street. So, I'm happy. But</p>

	<p>one thing would have been good if I had to go [to Lyles-Crouch] -- my mother was the cafeteria manager at Lyles-Crouch.</p> <p>It was a white school she worked at in the cafeteria—Jefferson School. And Jefferson, down on West Street, was segregated. That was for the whites. But the cafeteria help was—they had whites and blacks working in the cafeteria and my mother worked there. She wasn't the manager -- but when they turned the schools around, my mother was the cafeteria manager for a while at Lyles-Crouch. Miss Virginia Hilton was the principal. I was glad I didn't have to go out there. It was too far to go, but I missed being where I could see my mother.</p>
L.W.:	What was your schooling like at Parker Gray?
Shirley Steele:	Being a freshman and those seniors, you feel like you're in the first grade. And all those upperclassmen, they're looking down. But I liked it. It made me feel sort of grownup and you could go to football games and the Homecoming queens and things like that. I liked it. My stay was short; I left school and I started a family, but I enjoyed it. And I did go back and graduate.
L.W.:	Tell me about some of your neighbors that stood out in your mind.
Shirley Steele:	Some of my neighbors were my relatives. About this time, I think, when I was 12, my mother moved from Henry Street to Alfred Street. Some of my neighbors...one was my cousin—the Lovingood family. We lived at 812 North Alfred Street; they lived at 811. I would go places with my cousin. I felt secure with her. Sometimes we'd go to the dances. When she was ready to come home, I'd say, "Well, I'm going home too." Some of the other girls in my school...Lorraine Shepherd. Ms. Shepherd—she had the pageants [sp?] and she taught you how to crochet. I thought that was very nice. She looked out for the young ladies and she had something called "the love joy" pageants. I call them the Lady Masons.
Mr. Steele	Eastern Star.
Shirley Steele:	Eastern Star. It was something like for children and she would teach young girls how to crochet. And she brought her daughters up nice. I liked to go around Ms. Louise Shepherd's house on West Street. One of her daughters, Lorraine, was in my room at school. I enjoyed Lorraine. Lorraine is still living; we're still friends.
Segregation and Integration in Alexandria	
L.W.:	Describe segregated Alexandria and what were some of the benefits of integration?
Shirley Steele:	When you went to the bank, you didn't see anybody look like you. I think the first teller was Lucretia Miller Martin. She worked for the Hopkins House for a long time; she just retired. She was a teller, one of the first tellers, I think, at the bank on King and St. Asaph

	<p>Street – [it] used to be Alexandria National or First National—it’s changed a lot of names.</p> <p>Then too, you didn’t see any of the blacks in the post office. And where it’s still in the middle of King Street, the 600-block, there was a G. C. Murphy’s. You stood up at the counter and ate. But in the back, they had seats where you could sit down. You’d better not sit yourself back down back there in those days. It was okay when you just wanted to go in there and shop, but you couldn’t sit down. I’m trying to think if there were separate bathrooms. I don’t know.</p> <p>But you didn’t work at the post office; you didn’t work at the bank; you didn’t have any of the office jobs. Your job was cleaning up—the menial jobs. One thing that used to tick me---I didn’t go out too much late at night, but if you were on the Del Ray section of town (that’s where you get to George Washington High School), I heard you came back before it got dark; you didn’t go out there at night. You might get into a fight, or you might get hurt. So, I didn’t go into the Del Ray section.</p>
L.W.:	What were some of the segregated housing patterns?
Shirley Steele:	We were just in the projects. So, I don’t know if they gave them fair deals when you were trying to buy a house or what. But anyway, we were in the projects.
L.W.:	Did you see any benefits coming from integration?
Shirley Steele:	Oh, a lot of benefits. You could see blacks beginning to see little rays between the buttermilk, or something. You’d see people driving the post office trucks when you go to the post office. You’d see black men and women at the counters waiting on you and you’d feel good. You’d put your shoulders back and straighten up. And I went back to school. And I got a job working for the telephone company. And I remember paying my bill at the phone company and saying, “Oh, this is a nice place.” And before I knew it, I finished high school and I was behind the counter waiting on people and they were paying me. And I felt good about it—the equal rights.
L.W.:	About what year did you start to see integration occurring?
Shirley Steele:	Was it in the sixties—late to middle sixties? Martin Luther King. [19]68—something like that---early seventies? A new day.
Black Businesses, Social Organizations and Churches	
L.W.:	What do you remember about any black businesses, social organizations or religious groups?
Shirley Steele:	I am here for a reason. It was the same thing that’s still there today—right on the corner there’s a hairdresser. It’s been there ever since I was a little girl—about fifty years or so now. Dr. Newman C. Taylor—he was a dentist—right upstairs in this insurance office.

	<p>Lawyer Raby—he was a lawyer. And his daughter married Bobby Stafford. His office is right there. And Dr. Newman C. Taylor—he was a dentist and he used to help at the Health Department. And when you would go to schools in Alexandria they would send you to the Health Department and you’d see your dentist there. It makes you feel good to see somebody who looked like us when they’re waiting on you. A lot of the Newman family had a lot of pretty daughters. One of them was the dental assistant. One of them was the secretary, was it [at] Parker Gray School...Alberta Newman. She married Mr. Thurmond—one of the teachers. And you felt like they were the people who should be in <i>Ebony</i> and <i>Jet</i> magazine. It made me feel good.</p>
L.W.:	What about social organizations or religious organizations?
Shirley Steele:	<p>I went to the Baptist church that my parents sent me to and later on, as I grew up and beginning to study the Bible for myself, I started going to the church I used to make fun of--the Seventh Day Adventist. [laughter] I joined. He lived around the corner from it and he joined. So, I began to be more faithful in my church—try to live up to what the Bible say—not only outwardly, but inwardly—trying to help those less fortunate --begin to talk to other young girls who didn’t finish school, to go back and try and be good mothers to your children. Try to help a little bit in some of the organizations that I knew helped single moms. To make a difference in your community, be a little beacon light—let your little light shine.</p>
L.W.:	Were you involved with Prince Hall Masons or the Elks or the Order of Eastern Star?
Shirley Steele:	I wasn’t. I never joined those. My husband is a member of those.
L.W.:	Now you mentioned black dentists and black lawyers. How about black doctors or funeral homes?
Shirley Steele:	<p>I went to [pause—husband whispering to her]. Everybody knows [unclear] went to Dr. Ledray. He was kind; he was helpful. He didn’t charge you a lot. He was in the 300-block of Henry Street. If you needed a physical for school, you went to Dr. Ledray. And my husband has a picture with Dr. Ledray on it. And he just seemed like the knight in the community. [Husband whispering.] He was a Mason. His office was, I think, 320 North Henry and we lived at...[husband whispering]. He lived at 327. I remember across the street...[husband whispering]. But later on, his office was at 320 -- across the street. His house is still there at 327. I see it when I go to the hairdresser.</p>
L.W.:	How about the funeral homes?
Shirley Steele:	<p>The funeral homes. It’s still there. It was Chickey Bell---I don’t remember his real name; we call him Chickey Bell when we fool with him. [His real name is] Phillip Bell. Before he had it, Mr.</p>

	<p>Lewis had it. I don't remember Mr. Lewis' first name. Before that was Mr. Poole. And then there was a Richard Bentley; he had a funeral home. I remember when Mr. Green came. His services seemed very sophisticated. But the two had been able to be right here in Alexandria. Mr. Green is on--[husband and she talking softly]. I tried to think what street is Mr. Green's funeral home on --Franklin. This man has a good memory for going on ninety! That's my husband. [laughter]</p> <p>Miss Georgina Red—she had a beauty shop right on the corner of Alfred and Pendleton St. Marie Jackson—she was right here. And Miss Bigelow. And Ruth Sibert [sp?]. Then Miss Michelle—she was on the corner of Cameron Street --looked like she had everybody in Alexandria. You'd be there from seven in the morning until almost eleven at night and she'd be working first after another. [Husband whispering].</p> <p>Oh yes, they did have the swimming pool up near Parker Gray High School. And my husband had something to do with pouring the concrete. I remember two boys drowned there because they climbed over into the fence—the Johnson boys. Morris—he was in my room at school. It was devastating when we heard that they had climbed in that pool and—both of them died because no lifeguards. It was at night. You young and you don't know what to do when you hear about death. It was devastating to me the next day. They weren't in school and you hear them talk about it.</p>
L.W.:	What about black pharmacies?
Shirley Steele:	<p>Black pharmacies. This one boy. My husband said all the other boys used to tease him....staying in that drug store studying. They would be out playing football. Right there on Alfred Street his family grew up. Let me think of his name. He's a G-Y-N-. I can't think of his name. It'll come to me. Right there on Alfred Street. We called it Miss Bloom's Drug Store. She was the lady who worked in there and--it was Sulmar's: S-U-L-M-A-R'S Pharmacy. Odell McCatz. Have you ever heard of Dr. McCatz? Yes, he's a OB-GYN doctor. He was very kind. You'd go in there. He would work for Mr. Sulmar who was the man who owned the drug store. And he would work in there like a clerk helping to fill prescriptions and wait on people. He went to school and he became a pharmacist. He gained a lot of respect. Yes. Odell McCatz. [She and husband chatting.] And Mr. Staunton—his daughters work at the Black History Museum. He was a good minister and his daughters are very famous working in the community, helping people. He married me and my first husband, Samuel B. Ross. He had the church right</p>

	down the street—Third Baptist Church.
L.W.:	Can you remember any important or major events that occurred in this area that affected you or your family or the community?
Shirley Steele:	I always liked when they had the George Washington Parades. They would have the Masons in there and they would have their fez. And they would block the streets. We always liked when they had those parades because Parker Gray would be in there and you had a sense of pride as you see the girls in their majorette suits. George Washington Day Parade—that was it—the things I liked about it.
Returning to School	
L.W.:	Discuss some of your school activities and interests.
Shirley Steele:	I missed a lot by—coming out of school. I started my family. But then I gained a lot; I grew up with my children. Sometimes I would go to PTA. I think because I didn't finish school and I didn't have the quality of education that I wanted, you feel a little inferior sometimes when you go to PTA meetings or other things. But I went back to night school. I see my children graduating and I wanted to be able to help them and to help my grandchildren when they come. So, I went back to school and I think I was graduating from night school. I didn't get the GED. I went the long way. I was graduating, I think, when my daughter graduated. It was in [19]76 and I graduated in 1977 from T. C. Williams Adult Education. And I felt a sense of accomplishment. I have a picture of that upstairs. I was smiling, but the tears was running down. I tried to do better.
L.W.:	Is T. C. Williams the school that they talk about in the movie: "The Titans"?
Shirley Steele:	Yes, it is. My children weren't athletes like that. My brother-in-law was—my husband's baby brother was.
L.W.:	I want to know what you have to say. What was your parents' attitude or philosophy about education?
Shirley Steele:	I think my mother always wanted us to try and do better. She had two of us—my sister and myself. I think she wanted us to do better. By her working around the school seeing the children, she was happy that I went back and finished school. Unfortunately, she died two years before I finished. But she saw that I married and tried to rear my children right by taking them to church and being a good mom. And they got good grades in school. She was happy. So, she passed in peace. I got that from my mom. She was honest; she tried to help people. And she was a missionary in the church. We always went to the same church for a while until I joined the Adventist Church. She would send me up on King Street, the main shopping area, to

	<p>buy clothes. I said, “Who is she buying these for?” She would buy them for the children in the missionary home. She said, “We’re going down there and we gonna have a project. And we’re going to giving these orphan children some clothes.” I was proud of her for that. She sacrificed a lot for me and my sister and I was proud of her for that.</p> <p>And my father, he did support me although he didn’t marry my mom and he married someone else, he would support me and encourage me to do my best. And although I dropped out of school and had my children, he was there the night I got my diploma—he and my stepmom. He’s happy for my achievements. One of my studies in night school was Distributive Education. They taught you how to fill out job applications and look for a better job and that’s when I filled it out with what was called The C&P Telephone Company. I passed and my daughter in her senior year in high school, she took the test. She passed. And two years later, my youngest son, he took it and three of us was working for the telephone company. We were happy. We were happy with that. My oldest son, he went to Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama. So, we were happy.</p>
L.W.:	Did your parents own property or have a business?
Shirley Steele:	<p>Neither. No, they didn’t own property.</p> <p>My father did. He moved to Washington and he has a house in Washington.</p>
L.W.:	Now, you kind of walked me through this, but if you could do it again. What sort of work did you, your spouse and your children pursue?
Shirley Steele:	At first, I was doing the cleaning because I dropped out of school and started my family. But as they were fast growing and passing me in education, I say: “I’ve got to go back and try to help myself.” So that’s when I went back to night school and I went from cleaning to working for the telephone company. And my children—they are all the jobs they’ve had like my daughter, she still works for the telephone company. And my youngest son, he still works for the telephone company.
Family	
L.W.:	Describe family activities especially family reunions and any family traditions.
Shirley Steele:	My husband’s family is very close-knit—I’m talking about my first husband. We stayed together for 39 ½ years until he died in ’95. And it was a little while after Alex Haley and his things about “Roots” my husband’s family, they began to have these family reunions. And they still have them every two years and it sort of

	<p>pulled my children right into it because my husband was the oldest of seven children. And my mother-in-law, my first mother-in-law, she's 93 and she's still alive and she's a lovable person. And she just pulled us together. And they had four chapters—Ohio, Georgia, Florida and I can't think of the other places. And every two years, they had the family reunion and they're just always there. I have pictures upstairs of my husband's people and they're very close-knit. And my new husband, he's been with me to one of those reunions too. [laughter] A lot of fun.</p>
L.W.::	<p>Let me ask you this last question. What advice would you offer to people about life—especially young people?</p>
Shirley Steele::	<p>Sometimes you hear the young people saying, "I'm trying to find myself." I would tell them: "Find out who your Creator is. Find out where you came from. And then reach out and try and help somebody else and point them to where they came from and more too, where they're gonna go."</p>
L.W.::	<p>This isn't on here, but I'm just going to ask you if there's anything else you wanted to tell me about?</p>
Shirley Steele::	<p>I don't know if I'm permitted to have my husband say something. He wasn't born in Alexandria, but he was here before I was born. And he has a lot of wisdom. And if he can add anything and if it's permissible.</p>
L.W.::	<p>Sir?</p>
<p>Segregation and Civil Rights in Alexandria</p>	
Mr. Steele:	<p>Well, when I come here, this was a segregated town. You'd be the last one to get on the bus. And if you have a seat and a white lady come in, or a white person come in, you had to get up and let them have their seat. Regardless of what you looked like or how your clothes looked, you brush on by them and go all the way to the back. If there were some older seats for that and a white person come, you still had to get up and let him have that seat and you stand up.</p> <p>When I first come here, it was a two-way street; traffic going north and south; walk on both sides of the street. They decided they want to widen that street and they took four feet over each side of the street. They wanted for it to be wide enough to have three lanes and you would walk on each side of the street. But that meant that your sidewalk had been taken away -- you eight feet, or at least seven.</p> <p>There's a whole lot of things like the swimming pool she once mentioned at Fayette and Payne Street, where the boys got drowned. She didn't tell you where it was-- Fayette and Payne. I thought they got drowned in the river and the results of that, they got the swimming pool up there. That's the way I remember. She thought</p>

	they got drowned for the effort to resume to build that swimming pool because of that incident. So many things, I don't hardly know where to start at.
Shirley Steele:	I highly received him. I never realized one day I'd would be his wife.
Mr. Steele:	[laughter] No, see I stayed with my first wife for 57 years and 10 months before she passed. Then she come and asked me to marry her. [long laughter] I asked her would she marry me And she consented and here we are. We got married in...
Shirley Steele:	2000.
Mr. Steele:	My first wife—I think we got married in 1940 and we stayed together for 57 years and 10 months before she passed. This little girl I've been knowing all of my life. I asked her to marry me after we went together for a while and she consented. And we are a married couple. There is a difference in the age span there--- something like twenty years.
Shirley Steele:	I went to school with his son. The oldest of his sons. He served as a notary public for 22 years and he's at the polls--you worked at the polls for how many years?
Mr. Steele:	Ten. And, of course, [unclear].
Shirley Steele:	Those apartments there, now. Annie B. Rose-- she worked with my Aunt Lil...My aunt Mrs. Lillian Lane. She encouraged me to do some of the things, I was reluctant sometimes. You feel you don't know as much as other people. And Miss Annie B. Rose was a strong fighter for civil rights in the city of Alexandria. Those apartments are named after her—those senior citizens. And I remember Miss Rose when she was alive, we went to see her. Just as she was really sick and getting ready to...what shall I say? We could see that she was, you know, not going to make it.
L.W.: :	Going to pass?
Shirley Steele:	One thing she wanted to pass on, "Tell our young people that we fought hard to get them places and jobs where they are now." And she said she remembered going to the bank and seeing the young teller there chewing her gum and talking. And she said, "Honey, learn manners when you're waiting on people, you know, and how you should conduct yourself." I appreciate her. I had some pictures of her. My aunt worked with her on some civil rights things. [tape paused]
Mr. Steele:you took him to the lawyer—his building was at the corner of Princess and Alfred Street. I remember Alfred Street. And we were there for years and years since I can remember. His son become a lawyer and he defended them boys who was...
Shirley Steele:	The Alexandria Library was segregated and you couldn't go in and he....

Mr. Steele:organized a group of fourteen of us [unclear]. We'd go down and sit in that library. Go in that library and sit down. Lie in there so they had the police come in and take us out. And Carey, Jr. took it with his son (a lawyer, too) and he went down and defended them. And so they built that library, [Robert H.] Robertson Library. If you was one of the cleaning boys, you could go in when they finished.
L.W.: :	Now, this is what I'm going to do. [END]