



THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER
OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA



Oral History Interview

with

Shenise Foster

Interviewer: *Francesco De Salvatore*

Narrator: *Shenise Foster*

Location of Interview:

Lloyd House, 220 N. Washington Street, Alexandria, VA 22314

Date of Interview: *December 21, 2022*

Transcriber: *Ivy Whitlatch*

Summary:

Shenise Foster, an interpreter at the Black History Museum describes her personal reasons for attending the 2022 Pilgrimage to the Equal Justice Initiative Museum.

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General	Volunteering; Alexandria Community Remembrance Project
People	Madeline Morton Wilson; Benjamin Thomas; McArthur Meyer; Char McCargo Bah
Places	Alexandria Black History Museum; 700 North Patrick Street; Alabama, Montgomery; Selma; EJI Museum
Companies	Star Cab Company; Orange and Alexandria Railroad; Visit Montgomery

Introduction	
Shenise Foster	My name is Shenise Foster. I'm 39 years old. Today's date is December 21st, 2022, and I'm currently located at Lloyd House.
Francesco De Salvatore [00:00:14]	My name is Francesco and we are at Lloyd House and today is December 21st, 2022. So, Shenise, can you maybe tell us a little bit about what led you to join the pilgrimage?
Volunteering at Black History Museum	
Shenise Foster [00:00:30]	I was interested in joining the pilgrimage because I've been a long-time Alexandria Black History Museum volunteer for over 15 years now. So, it's always been part of my interest to learn the whole story of a person, right? So going to the pilgrimage and going to all the different events and looking at the legacy museum and things like that, it was really eye opening.
Francesco De Salvatore	What led you to volunteer for the Black History Museum?
Shenise Foster	At the time when I moved here, I want to say in 2006, 2005, 2006, I was looking, how can I be more involved in the community. And I saw an ad in the paper and they were looking for volunteers at the Black History Museum. I was like, okay, let me see what this all about. I fill out the application and then they selected me. And then from there, it's just been history.
Francesco De Salvatore	Why do you think you're so interested in in history, in specifically, black history?
Shenise Foster	Right. Well, first and foremost, I'm black, so that's always a number one plus. But, you always get a glossed over part of history. And like, I'm always into the details. That's just my personality and the personal story of it. So, we know about Martin Luther King and we know about MLK. I mean, excuse me, Malcolm X and all the great leaders like Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. But what about Joe Schmo over here? What did he do to help contribute to society? Because obviously he was part of that bigger picture.
Francesco De Salvatore [Are there any bits of history that are surprising to you or that really stick out to you or people that you think you've learned about?

Shenise Foster	I guess for me, the sit in in 1939, sitting at the library, I didn't know that was the first actual sit in in the country, which was a big eye opener because they don't talk about that at all. That was pretty cool to learn about. And then just on a side note, like my family living here at one point in time, having connection during that time period, too, it's kind of cool. I'm like, wow, they lived right down the street, basically from the library.
Family History in Alexandria	
Francesco De Salvatore [00:02:51]	Can you maybe talk more about your family history?
Shenise Foster	So my grandmother lived here when she was about five years old, but then she ended up moving up to Philadelphia eventually. But she lived with her aunt. Her name was Madeline Morton Wilson. She owned a black cab company called Star Cab Company, and they lived at 700 North Patrick Street. Which is kind of crazy because a few weeks ago we had the reception for the accreditation and I didn't realize that Benjamin Thomas, who was lynched unfortunately in the city, lived at 700 North Patrick Street. And I said, get out of here. So just that connection I was meant to go on the pilgrimage then because I didn't know that at all. So that was a token.
Francesco De Salvatore	Interesting. What does it feel like to learn about that?
Shenise Foster	The lynching itself?
Francesco De Salvatore	Or just the proximity to [where Benjamin Thomas lived]
Shenise Foster	I was blown. I didn't know it. It was really mind blowing. Had no clue at all. Even though they lived at that address in the forties, in the fifties, it wasn't too long ago.
Francesco De Salvatore	Could you describe your grandmother?
Shenise Foster	Oh, my grandmother. She's a spitfire kind of person. She's a go getter. She grew up in the city. You get to be streetwise as well as educated. She ended up moving to Cape May, New Jersey. And I know we were kind of talking about how the transient part of my life was because she moved there. She had eight children, my mother being the third of the eight. And we're kind of dispersed everywhere. But she lived a good life and she's still here today, so she's kicking.

Francesco De Salvatore	That's great. Are there any family stories about Alexandria, about that period when they were here that your family retell sometimes when you're around the table or anything?
Shenise Foster	Well, it was one of those things the older generation doesn't like to talk about unless you start probing. So, when I started doing a little bit of my genealogy, I would ask her questions and she was open to them. She still remembers St Joseph's Day School for Catholic training and then she remembers going in a cab down King Street when she wasn't supposed to, and basically going shopping like a seven-year-old down King Street, just going shopping in the street, at the different stores and stuff. So, she kind of got in trouble for that. But that's one of her fun memories that she always tells.
Francesco De Salvatore	That's great. And you mentioned that you did a genealogy of your family. What were the things you learned about your family that you didn't know?
Shenise Foster	So, one of the things I didn't know was about my great aunt, Madeleine Wilson's son. His name was Buddy, and he owned a plane. And I was like, wow, it's really random to own a plane, especially, a black man back in the fifties owning a plane. And come to find out, there was an airport down Route 1 where he stored the plane. Like, I know it's crazy, right? So, I went on a hunt to look for that? And of course it's not there, it's like a shopping mall, strip mall kind of thing.
Shenise Foster	But some of the elders that I talked to, they were saying that they remembered him and how he was a lovely guy and things like that. So, I wanted to go a little bit further and after looking at the census records and stuff, I saw that they came from Orange, Virginia, which is 30 minutes outside of Fredericksburg. So, I drove down there and I was wondering how could they have gotten here? And the people down there were telling me that there was a, what do you call it, a railroad called the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. A lot of people were hired there. So that's how most people came up to Alexandria from that area. And Orange County, Virginia area, if you know Gordonsville, they're known as the fried chicken capital of the world. And back then, the railroad used to run through Gordonsville, and there would be black women who would stand on the side of the road selling chicken dinner plates and stuff like that. So, they came from that area and that kinda of makes sense how they got here and why they got here because obviously it probably dried up. Not enough jobs there. So, let's move north to find some employment
Francesco De Salvatore	Well, so you went down there?
Shenise Foster	Oh, yeah. Not too far from here.
Francesco De Salvatore	Clearly, you're committed. I mean, you're committed to learning about your family history. What's it like uncovering this history for you? Describe it to me.

Shenise Foster	For me, it's eye opening. It's more a sense of connection rather than just your immediate family. To know that there's other people out there and they do have names and we should learn about their personalities or what they contributed to society, even though there's not a lot of details when it comes to black culture and African American history and stuff like that. But just to uncover it and say, yep, they were here, they did matter.
Francesco De Salvatore	Were there people that inspired you to do this? Like growing up with a teacher, your parents, where did your love of history begin?
Shenise Foster	Well, I've always been like a reader. When you read stories, I want to tell my story, too. So that's what that was more about. Like with most families, they're just trying to live day by day. So, they tell you stuff from their childhood and stuff like that, but then you ask more and they don't know. I want to contribute to my family in some way. How can I do that? Let me find out who these people are. So, you have a better sense of us as a whole.
Francesco De Salvatore	So, did you, make something with the research you did? How did pull this together?
Shenise Foster	Like, everybody I used ancestry.com. And I just documented it there, but I did do like a small snippet video for my grandmother for her 79th birthday. I just went around to all the locations that she used to live at, like at 700 North Patrick. I went over there even though it's not a house anymore. Just the address there and there is a structure there. And then I went over to Saint Joseph's so she could see what the church looked like. About two years ago. I also, in front of Charles Houston Rec Center, they have the memorial bricks. So, I got a brick for Madeline Moore Wilson inscribed with Star Cab Company
Star Cab Company	
Francesco De Salvatore [00:09:37]	Is there anything we should know about Star Cab Company? Like how long were they in business?
Shenise Foster	Star Cab Company was the first black owned, women owned cab company in the city. At first it was run out of 700 North Patrick in the house by my great aunt, she also was a hairdresser, so she ran a hairdresser in the back of her house and then there was the telephone switch pad kind of thing where she would run the cab company. And she had a fleet of cab company owners. A few years ago, I got to talk to Mr. Charity, who was one of the drivers at Star Cab Company. And I also do this kind of thing. I interviewed him, with the help of Char McCargo Bah. She helped me with that because she knew him very well. But unfortunately, he passed away. But I

	did have the recording of him talking about how he loved working for that company and stuff like that, which is pretty cool.
Francesco De Salvatore	That's great. What did the cabs look like? Have you seen photos of them?
Shenise Foster	Yeah, it was kind of like those old school New York cabs. I don't know what that car is. You had the round kind of roof and it had, of course, Star Cab Company on the side of the doors. From the picture I saw was mostly white with black writing. Pretty simple.
Francesco De Salvatore	And did she keep doing that when they moved to Philly?
Shenise Foster	So, no. Unfortunately, the reason why my grandmother had to move to Philly because my great aunt had cancer and she would go for treatment at Howard University Hospital. Unfortunately, she passed away from it, so that's why she had to move. Because I think they were in the plans to adopt her at the time.
Pilgrimage Experience	
Francesco De Salvatore [00:11:25]	That's great. So, all of this happened, and you are gearing up to go on a pilgrimage. Walk us through what was it like going to the pilgrimage? Did you take the bus?
Shenise Foster	Unfortunately, I did not take the bus because that's a long haul. I flew. I got there. I took the two-hour flight. Pretty simple. I was there when the bus did arrive, though, because I believe my flight came in about 7:00. They got there about 11:00 o'clock, I think 10:00 o'clock or 11:00 o'clock. I was there to see McArthur Meyers bring in the ashes. And we had an opening ceremony kind of thing where he, I mean excuse me, the soil he brought into the hotel, which kind of set the tone for this is what we're here for.
Francesco De Salvatore	What was that like for you?
Shenise Foster	It was pretty cool. I mean, just to see everybody's reaction even though they were tired, everybody had excitement on their face, but also a sense of a pride that we're actually making something right.

Francesco De Salvatore	Say more about that. What do you mean by making something right?
Shenise Foster	Just honoring the names of those who were slain for no reason at all. Putting them in a place where they can be amongst others, who unfortunately found the same fate. Just saying their names out loud. Saying you were here. You did matter. And we're sorry, basically.
Francesco De Salvatore	What other memories stood out for you from the pilgrimage?
Shenise Foster	Well, we had a dinner, which was kind of like an interactive dinner, and I forgot the young lady's name who was doing it. It was kind of like a riff on a Seder. And one of the props, not props, but one of the interactive activities that we had was you actually pick a piece of cotton. Now, never in my life did I think that I would pick cotton, but I was like, you did all this work for this little ball of cotton to pick this little piece of seeds out of it so it can be perfect for sale. And just imagine doing that on a larger scale. And the brutal heat. And lack of water. And someone barking down your throat just harassing you while you work. Is crazy. You forget. It's like, well, you don't forget. You just don't know. Because you can't imagine it.
Francesco De Salvatore	How does that make you feel? What other memories stood out to you?
Shenise Foster	Well, you know, everybody has a perception about being in Alabama because it's the South ... the deep, deep south. But I didn't find that jarring. I thought everybody that I encountered there was very nice, very helpful. But there's always an undercurrent, everybody can sense it. Everybody has their barometers up. But I didn't feel outright that intimidated. Now I thought the staff who helped us, the Visit Montgomery people, they were very, very, very nice, they were very accommodating. They did an excellent job of showing us everything their city has to offer. I really enjoyed the tour that we did with, gosh, I'm so bad with names, it's horrible. We went around Montgomery with one of the tour guides. And I like the fact that it was someone who actually lived there through the civil rights movement till today, still lives there, wanted to showcase her city and all of its glory was totally amazing.
Francesco De Salvatore	What do you mean? What do you mean by undercurrents?

Shenise Foster	Well, an undercurrent that's almost that Southern hospitality, that nice, nasty kind of attitude. Like, when some people go into a spot, it's like, yeah, you're here, but I really don't want you here. But I'm gonna eat there anyway because I want to eat here. So, in some places, in some instances you could feel it, but they would still service you because ultimately they want your money.
Francesco De Salvatore	Why? Why or what do you think was happening? Like why? Why was it, why that that dynamic present?
Shenise Foster	I think because people have their biases. Everybody has a bias, right? They might have a bias just because I'm dressed just a certain way. Doesn't mean you should treat me that way? So that's what it is. Or maybe it could have been because I'm a tourist. What are you doing in my city? You know, it's not my job to figure out why they feel the way they feel. It's kind of like, I want to go here. I want to see it, I want to eat there. I want to play there. Whatever. I'm going to do it.
Francesco De Salvatore	What else about the city? About the state that stood out to you as you visited it?
Shenise Foster	I was surprised that Alabama isn't, it was still a little bit more nots. Well, let me talk about Montgomery. Montgomery is a beautiful city because it's the capital but still it was a sleepy town. Like at a certain time of day, like soon as 5:00 o'clock hit, nobody was in sight. It was like, okay, that's different for something to be the state capital, right? And then Selma, when we see people walking across the bridge on TV, the bridge looks huge. But when you get there, it's so small, it's like, wow, really? It doesn't lead a big existence. It's kind of crazy. It's almost like you go to the Leaning Tower of Pisa, you look at it and you're like that's not so big. What's the big deal about this Tower. But the bridge is not that large.
Francesco De Salvatore	Any other memories from the trip that stood out to you?
Shenise Foster	I really enjoyed just being in a different space. Here in Alexandria, always on the go, go, go, go. There they take it kinda easy. So that was nice to be in that type of environment, which was really cool. I did do a little bit of exploring on my own as well, so I did walk around the whole city just to just walk. It's a really walkable city, which is kind of cool.
Francesco De Salvatore	What did you observe on your walk?

Shenise Foster	Unfortunately, there's a lot of homelessness in the city. Which I find strange because it's not a big city, it's not like D.C. So, at a certain point, if you're trying to access resources, they're not available for you there. But they did have a really, really cool like donation type of system. They had like parking meters and you could donate to the homeless. And then you can put either your credit card in there to donate or put coin, which is pretty cool. I thought that's a pretty ingenious idea for donations. And they would just have it plotted everywhere. You know, every few blocks or so.
Reaction to EJI [Equal Justice Initiative] Museum	
Francesco De Salvatore [00:19:29]	What did you think about the EJI [Equal Justice Initiative] Museum?
Shenise Foster	The Equal Justice Museum was amazing. I mean, I like the way that they took you on a journey similar to how the Smithsonian does. They take you from Africa all the way thru the different periods of time to the present day. And then at the end, well, in the middle of it, you do have the jars all on display. And just to see all the jars there, it's massive. It's like what in the world were people thinking. It's crazy. And then the different colors of the soil, of the dirt and stuff. It was really it's eye opening.
Francesco De Salvatore	What was it like to see that wall?
Shenise Foster	It was shocking at first. And then, you know, you're trying to read everybody's names just to pay respect in a way. But it was just so many, so many. But they did have a great interactive display where you can actually type in your state or click on your state to see who was actually lynched in the state.
Francesco De Salvatore	Did you do that?
Shenise Foster	I looked for, of course, Virginia. And they showed ours there. Well, that was cool.
Francesco De Salvatore	Do you think it's important or what do you think? What's the importance of having that?
Shenise Foster	The importance of having that is not to forget. We don't want to whitewash anything anymore. Right. Tell everything the good, the bad and the ugly. It is what it is. It happened. So, by having that there, it helps people to either confront their inner emotions, their inner biases, and maybe try to rectify that on their own. To actually learn something

	and pass on the stories and then just to keep it documented because, too easily anybody can spin the story to fit their narrative.
Reaction to Alexandria's African American Initiatives	
Francesco De Salvatore [00:21:37]	Well, what do you think's at issue with how Alexandria tells its narrative? Maybe there's not a single narrative, but there's definitely a dominant narrative in Alexandria, per se. Or is there? Let's start there? Is there a dominant narrative? What is it?
Shenise Foster	Well, I think right now Alexandria is in a position of transition. So there has always been a narrative talk about African American stories. It just hasn't been heard yet. The good thing about Alexandria is we are in a position to change it now. We have the foundation, we have the tools now. We just need the funding to help us get there. And the people who want to help tell the story. More activism is required.
Francesco De Salvatore	So, what do think is missing from the narrative about Alexandria? Not missing, but what's been ignored.
Shenise Foster	I don't feel anything's been ignored too much. I think what I would like to see more is more parallel stories. If, for example, Mr. Lloyd, what was his relationship to his slaves, that kind of thing. More of that. We could see the parallel from all levels rather than just, yes, everybody did great things in their life, but some people would do some crappy stuff. Tell his crappy stuff. He was a slave owner, right? Why do you have slaves? Why so many?
Francesco De Salvatore	Anything else? What other things would you want to see included in the historical narrative of Alexandria?
Shenise Foster	I guess now because we focus so much on black and white, maybe a little bit more of the diversified side of it. So more about the Latino culture or more about, you know, the Asian culture. How do they contribute? There's not a lot of that here
Additional Thoughts on Pilgrimage	
Francesco De Salvatore [00:23:37]	That's great. As you look back at the whole trip, the way it was organized, what are your thoughts about it? From looking at the whole sort of weekend and the build up to it. We've had time for reflections. Want to share any thoughts you've had since.

Shenise Foster	I think it was a was a huge effort. I know there was a lot of people behind the scenes doing a lot of work and having a lot of man hours spent on this. I really appreciate it. I thought it was very well organized. The only thing that I would suggest is maybe separation based on ages, the adults and the high schoolers. A lot of the high schoolers were hyper, hate to say it, hyper emotional compared to the adult side who was trying to learn, embrace, understand that history. There were points in the trip where the adults couldn't talk to the children because they were too triggered by what was being done. Also, maybe a little with the programing, maybe gear it a little bit more differently based on the audience.
Francesco De Salvatore	Did you participate in the soil collection before the pilgrimage? Were you at those events or not
Shenise Foster	No , I didn't get to go to those. But I did get to go to the remembrance [ceremony] , I want to say, was it Benjamin Thomas when they had it at City Hall. And then they went to the actual pole. So, I got to go to that.
Francesco De Salvatore	Any memories from that stand out?
Shenise Foster	That, well it was pretty cool. I love the fact that they had speakers of all ages there. They incorporated the children again, which I thought was really good. They read a great poem and then also the carrying of the wreath to the pole, too, which is neat. Earlier that day, I had gone on a tour of the cemetery, I guess, where the general public lot was, where they buried people. I just wanted to see what that was about before I went there to see where they probably buried him. And that was neat. To get a full circle moment from actually going to the plot, too. And the pole.
Francesco De Salvatore	Is there anything else about the trip as you look back at the whole weekend that you want to mention?
Shenise Foster	I guess a little bit more time because we were on a quick path. It was like wow wee. It's what a four hour cruise must feel like. But, just a little bit more time I guess to space it out so you can get time to digest it. I know they gave us time, I want to say on the third day, where we could go back and look at things. But, if it's only like two events a day and then free time, that would have been nice.
Francesco De Salvatore	That makes sense. You mentioned how you were surprised by the how small the [Edmund Pettus]bridge was. Well, anything else that was surprising to you that you didn't expect from the trip?
Shenise Foster	I wasn't surprised by too much because I was pretty much open to the experience. Whatever comes my way, I'm going to take it. I think the only thing I think I was surprised was by people's surprise about some of the stuff that happened. I was like,

	<p>why ? we know it was ugly. We know this happened. We've seen the pictures. I don't understand why you're so surprised and why it's taking you back. But people were really and that's not to be judging or anything. It was just like, we know that. We've seen the pictures.</p>
Francesco De Salvatore	<p>Can you talk more about this, the situations.</p>
Shenise Foster	<p>Yeah. So, like in one instance, when you go through EJI Museum and they have pictures of some of the lynchings and stuff like that.</p> <p>People were really put back by that. And I was like, well, we've seen these things on TV. You've seen them in museums, other museums. I guess for me it was kind of one of those things. I don't know how much people are really exposed to. That tells me you're not exposed enough because you're not outreaching enough to learn. You shouldn't have to come to one location to learn this. You should already. If you're already interested in something, you should research it to the fullest, in my opinion</p>
Francesco De Salvatore	<p>What else did you learn from the trip that you didn't already know?</p>
Shenise Foster	<p>What did I learn? Well, like I told you earlier about that cotton thing, that kind of was mind blowing to me. I was like, this little seed produces cotton, and this is what caused all this.</p>
Francesco De Salvatore	<p>Anything else that you learned?</p>
Shenise Foster	<p>I think for me, it was more, a little bit more of a social experience, too, because, like I was saying, with the different people's emotions, how they react to stuff. You can see how much you can tell somebody until they hit their breaking point. Not necessarily saying that they fall apart, but the little things like your body language, how people just start shifting when you talk about things. It helped me recognize that a little bit more when I'm trying to tell the things to other people where to stop at or if I can keep going.</p>
Francesco De Salvatore	<p>So you came back to be a better tour guide.</p>
Shenise Foster	<p>Well, not a tour guide. Interpreter.</p>
<p>Addressing Alexandria's Past</p>	

Francesco De Salvatore [00:31:03]	So after coming back from this trip, what changes do you want to see in Alexandria?
Shenise Foster	I would like to see the community be more involved in it. We live in a metropolitan area. People are always on the go, but maybe, find digestible ways for people to want to engage more. Some people are not history buffs. They don't want to know all that. Some people are more, they want to know the personal parts of it. They want to actually see and touch something. Just look at different venues, avenues to get the story out.
Reaction to ACRP [Alexandria Community Remembrance Project]	
Francesco De Salvatore [00:33:09]	What about for ACRP [Alexandria Community Remembrance Project]? What do you hope for next steps?
Shenise Foster	So next steps I would definitely love would be a walking tour of the event at hand. How did it happen? Go from where Benjamin Thomas was plucked from his home and walk all the way down to city hall where he was jailed and to the pole, that kind of thing. To talk about the events as it happened. I think that would be pretty cool. And then also ultimately have another pilgrimage down there. And talk about other city residents that maybe migrated to Alexandria from Montgomery or something like that.
Closing Comments	
Francesco De Salvatore	Before we close out, is there anything I haven't asked you that you want to share? Any closing thoughts?
Shenise Foster	My closing thoughts will probably be I'm just really appreciative that I got to actually be on this first inaugural. I'm putting it out there. First inaugural trip down to the civil rights mecca of the country and I hope that it would actually occur again. But I think that Alexandria is one of the leading cities in telling African American history. Is not afraid to tell that history. The only thing is that we just need additional funding and additional manpower to continue the story. I mean, if you can't have those advocates or the resources, it's just going to fizzle out. And I don't want to see that happen. And I will definitely be a part of making sure it doesn't happen.
Francesco De Salvatore	That's great. That's great. Well, thank you so much, Shenise. Appreciate it.