

## Virginia Key Trust Oral History Transcript

**Enid Pinkney, Director of the Historic Hampton House, Interviewed by F.I.U. Graduate Student Maureen Thompson, March 9, 2018**

THOMPSON: Can you please talk into the microphone to make sure it's working?

PICKNEY: Okay, your name is Maureen Thompson? (Laughter)

THOMPSON: So, interviews typically begin with people explaining their backgrounds, so you can tell me when and where you were born, and if you have any experiences in your childhood that influenced you?—If you don't mind talking about this.

PICKNEY: I was born in Miami, Florida in a section of Miami called Overtown. I was born at 1857 NW Fifth Court. That's the address of the house that I was born in, and I grew up there. I went to school, to Dunbar Elementary school, which is still located on Twentieth Street, and I went to Booker T. Washington High School. I graduated from Booker T. Washington high school in 1949, and then I went to Talladega College, which is located in Talladega, Alabama, and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in social science from Talladega College in 1953.

After that, I went to Chicago to work, and I had a very good working experience there, but one of the things that I observed was that you know—I thought I was going up north where there wasn't segregation because I had lived through segregation in Miami, but I found that segregation was there also. But it was more subtle, and a lot of times people did not really realize how segregated they were because of the subtleties. So, my mother became ill and I decided that I would come back to Miami, and I began teaching. [I] got a job teaching at Darcy Junior High School and I later pursued a Master's Degree in guidance and counseling and I became a counselor at Edison Senior High School. That was during the time when the schools were desegregated, so I had that experience. Later, I applied to become an assistant principal, and I became the assistant principal at South Miami Junior High School, and I did that for twenty years. In fact, I worked for the Miami-Dade County school board for thirty-six years, twenty of those years as an assistant principal. And then I retired, but I was still active with historic preservation.

I became a member of the Dade Heritage Trust, which is the historic preservation organization, and I became involved in—I was president of Dade, I was the first black president of the Dade Heritage Trust, and I was president during the time that the [Miami] Circle became involved in historic preservation because it was a special place for Indians. I led that preservation effort to

stop a parking lot from being built on the Circle, which had a lot of Indian artifacts and historical information. And then after that, the Hampton House—well, the Hampton House was here, but it had become a derelict building and a lady by the name of Kathy Hirsch came to the African-American Committee of Dade Heritage Trust, which I was chair of, and asked if the African-American Committee would sponsor the historic designation of the Hampton House. She came with three videos about the Hampton House, and most of us knew about the Hampton House in its glory days when it was such an elegant place so it wasn't that hard to convince us that it should receive historic designation. And so as we agreed to do that and began to pursue that, we learned that Miami-Dade County was going to demolish the building because the neighbors had complained that the drug addicts and the homeless had taken over the building and it was a sore spot in the community. So, we said, well, you can't get historic designation for a demolished building, so one of the first things that we had to do was to stop the demolition and so that's how I got involved with the Hampton House.

Sort of around the same time, there was talk about Virginia Key Beach and the City of Miami was thinking about making it some kind of eco-tourist camp or something like that. We didn't understand and so a group of us got together. We called ourselves the task force for Virginia Key Beach, and we said, "This is the colored beach. So, how is it now going to become this eco-tourist camp or whatever the city was trying to make it?" Because of the history that we needed to preserve it for, what it originally was meant to be, a group of us formed that task force for the preservation of Virginia Beach.

THOMPSON: Okay, and this was around what year? Maybe in 2000? 1999? Do you have any idea as to time-wise?

PICKNEY: Yes, around 2000. I would say because it was 2001 when I started working with the Hampton House.

THOMPSON: Right, and I heard that if you had waited maybe even two weeks, this place wouldn't be here. So you had to work very quickly, yes?

PICKNEY: (Laughs) Yes. Oh yes. You know that that there was the effort to—to demolish it so there was like a couple of things going on around the same time with the preservation of black institutions being demolished or changed, or what have you. The work that I did with, the Hampton House, started out with the African-American community. But then what would happen was that the African-American community, after they saw what was going to be involved with dealing with the government—and they weren't interested in that they were interested in the programs that they did like, the commemorative service and the essay contests, youth talent,

parades, and you know those activities. So that's how we formed the Historic Hampton House Community Trust. That's how that was formed. As far as the Hampton House was concerned, I'm back on the Hampton House. We didn't have any money to do anything with.

We wanted to preserve the building, but we didn't own the building, and we didn't have any money to preserve it. What we did was—we asked to become a part of the general obligation bond program and when I received the application for that, I did not fill it out because it required an architect. You had to say what you want to do with the money so, I asked Richard Heisenbottle, who was an architect who's on the board of AIA Miami Dade Heritage Trust to come out to the Hampton House, and look at the building and help me with the application. And he did. And he estimated that it would take about 4.7 million dollars to restore the building, and we were able to get into the general obligation bond program for 4.7 million dollars, but then the county waited so long to actually put the bid out, that when the bid finally went out, the person who got the first bid had to turn it down because they said 4.7 million dollars would not do the job.

By that time, we had a new commissioner. When we first started on the project, Commissioner Barbara Carey Schuler was the District Three commissioner, and by the time we got to try to get enough money to restore the building, Commissioner Edmonson was the commissioner so we talked with her and got her favor, and so she brought in more money. She brought in 5 million dollars, and so we got another bid that was another bid for that and then when that person actually looked into what it would cost, turned the bid down, that it was not enough money, so we were still wondering what we were going to do.

Then, we found a company, Link Construction Company, who said that they could, they would do a portion of it for 6 million dollars, but that was not to complete everything that needed to be done. We were so desperate. We said we would take that to be that. What happened was that [the money] was able to complete the community room, the café, and the patio. The rest was, just left there, and we couldn't put the swimming pool back, but we did have a fountain out there, and so now we are working on a gift shop, a museum, and an archival space. We also will have a replica of the room that Dr. Martin Luther King—his favorite room Mohamed Ali's favorite room—which will be a part of the museum, and so that's where we are right now as far as the restoration of the Hampton House.

But getting back to Virginia Key Beach—we were able to stop the development of the Virginia Key Beach because when we thought about it, [we realized] that at one point in Miami, there was no place for black people to go to a beach. And so, when we were given Virginia Key Beach, it was considered the black or the colored beach, and now it looked like what the city wanted to do was to turn it into some exclusive place where black people would not be able to afford to go.

And so, a group of us who felt that the history of Virginia Key Beach needed to be preserved got together and formed the Virginia Beach Task Force, which later became the Virginia Key Beach Trust for the preservation of Virginia Key Beach because it has such history not only for the social aspect where people would go for picnics and church events, but it also had a religious part because my father was a minister and he used to go out there to baptize people, at Virginia Key Beach, so it served the community in various ways and we did not want to lose that, that history, and the availability to everybody, so that everybody could come to the beach that is. It wouldn't be so expensive that it would economically exclude people, and so that has been the mission of keeping that beach open to the public.

THOMPSON: Yes.

PICKNEY: But I think that you know developers who would like to see that as a special place for special people. I don't think that they have given up on that, and I think that the community will have to keep an eye on plans for Virginia Key Beach because the thing that ought not to happen, could still happen if, if we're not vigilant to keep it from happening. I was vice-chair of the trust, but with the development of the Hampton House, I found that it was a little too much for me and I'm getting older now. (Laughs) I can't get around like I got used to.

THOMPSON: It happens.

PICKNEY: But I still have interest in the preservation of Virginia Key Beach.

THOMPSON: Well, you seem to be getting around just fine to me. Do you know who is in charge now? Who would you say is in charge of that project, [of the] Virginia Key Trust?

PICKNEY: Well Guy Forchion, is the executive director and Gene Tinney is chairman of the board, and you still have some of the—Maud Newbold is one of the original members that's still on the board, you have Patrick Range, and some of the people who were there when I was on the board are still there.

THOMPSON: Did you ever go out to Virginia Key Beach with your family, or to accompany your father when he was performing baptisms?

PICKNEY: Yes.

THOMPSON: What was your personal experience?

PICKNEY: In fact, I went out during the baptisms and even when my father died, after my father passed, I went out there. He left my mother a car; the car that he had, he left it to my mother. I drove that car to Virginia Key Beach one day. I was having problems with my ankle and somebody said you should go into the saltwater and soak your feet in the water, and so I drove out to the beach, parked the car, and went into the water. When I came back, my car was stolen (laughs), and I felt so bad because that was my mother's car that my father left for her, and I said 'How I'm I going to tell her that the car was stolen?' But I went out. We went out to the beach as many times as we could.

THOMPSON: When your car was stolen, was the beach heavily occupied?

PICKNEY: Yes! A lot of people were out there.

THOMPSON: Around what year would you put that?

PICKNEY: Let's see. When was that? That was—let's see. I cannot. I'm trying to think—

THOMPSON: Your father passed in what year? Do you know?

PICKNEY: My father passed in '67.

THOMPSON: So, a year or two afterward?

PICKNEY: Yes.

THOMPSON: So it was still being frequented. At that point, was it an integrated beach or was it still separate?

PICKNEY: It was still separate.

THOMPSON: I would like to circle back to something you had talked about. A little red flag went up. You were talking about being a teacher, or being a principal during the desegregation process. So, what was that like? You were there as the schools were desegregating.

PICKNEY: Yes. Well, I taught during the time of segregation and then during that period [when] integration came into being. I took a sabbatical because I wanted to get my Master's in guidance and counseling, and since I was qualified to become a counselor, there was an opening at Edison Senior High School. Edison had been a white school, and so I did [experience integration]. I was a counselor there. I got a job at Edison, and the students who had attended Booker T. Washington High School, were transferred to Edison because Booker T. became a middle school or junior high school.

One of the problems that the school faced was integrating the cheerleaders, and the flagettes, and various organizations. The first person who tried out for majorette was Gayla Brown, and she did not make it, and it caused the black students to be very upset because they looked to her for leadership. Her father was an ophthalmologist, her mother was well-educated, and from a prominent family, and so they were—they said well, you know, if she can't make it, none of us are going to be able to make it in the school. There was a demonstration, and even the football players—now the football players were welcome because they could help bring winnings to the school, but there were no black majorettes and so we had to deal with that.

There were students who had other complaints so I started meeting with these students in homes. The parents wanted to figure out how they could work with the school to make it a better place for their students, and I met with them in homes in the community. We talked about what was going on and so I suggested that they put it in writing, and it turned out to be a play. This was outside of school and the school was not aware of what we were doing. There was one student who was learning his part in the teacher's class and she picked up the paper and looked at it and saw what was going on, and she reported it to the principal. So he came to me and he asked me if I knew what was going on with this, and I said, "Yes, but I'm helping them," and I said, "These are some of the problems that the students are saying that they're having. One of the things that they said was that whenever they raise their hands, if they knew an answer to a question, the teacher would ignore them, and when they didn't know, when they didn't have their hands out, the teacher would call on them. And so they didn't like that." I told [the principal] to put that in the play and so he said, "Well okay," but some of the grammar was incorrect, and I knew that. I wasn't going through all of that trying to get the subject and the words to agree. He said that he

would have an English teacher to work with me to clean it up, and I said okay, and then he said what we could do is have the students present it in the chorus room with a group of faculty members to see just how it would turn out. I said, “No, I don’t think we want to do that because if we do that, it’s censorship and I don’t want the students to be censored. I don’t mind the [fixing of] grammar, and the English, and the spelling, and all of that. That can be corrected. But I don’t want a group of teachers doing a critique on how these students feel because then it will undermine what I’m trying to do.” So, he said okay.

THOMPSON: Good. He cooperated.

PICKNEY: When we did that, when we did the play, he also had a drama teacher to work with us—which I accepted—to make it more pleasing as a drama. So that was good, but I wanted it in the auditorium where all the other plays were held. Somehow or another, the *Miami News* heard about it. That was a paper here, an evening paper that we used to have here in Miami, it no longer exists. Ellis Berger from the *Miami News* came out to see the play. He was in the audience and he wrote about it in the *Miami News*, and *Channel 10* heard about it and asked the students to come and present it on *Channel 10*. So it was also written about in the *Miami News* and the students had the opportunity to present it on *Channel 10*. That made them feel good, that somebody listened to them. They were able to express themselves and those students are doing magnificent things now. Some of them are millionaires. Some of them are working here in the community. They’re all over the United States, and so, I’m very proud.

THOMPSON: Obviously! It wouldn’t have happened without you. And, the students were actually able to perform in front of the student body?

PICKNEY: Yes, and what happened at the end of the play, in the auditorium, the student body gave them a standing ovation. (Laughs)

THOMPSON: That’s the best part of the story. You recognized where they were coming from.

PICKNEY: Yes.

THOMPSON: That’s a great story, and it would not have happened without your guidance. Besides desegregation of schools, how would you say South Florida and the community has changed over the years?

PICKNEY: Well, in general, the whole community was segregated. You had to sit in the back of the bus, you had colored fountains and white fountains and so it's been a big change since I was growing up. (Laughs) Going to school, and living through segregation, this is altogether different, and the other thing is, I live in a black community, but the community is changing because you have a lot of Hispanic people moving into the black community. The neighborhoods are changing. There are changes everywhere.

THOMPSON: That's for sure. If we can go back to discussing the Historic Hampton House—what is the significance? What does the building and its existence convey to the community, to the immediate community, and say, all of South Florida?

PICKNEY: Well, I think that this building represents a period of the history of segregation in Miami. Dr. Martin Luther King would come here, or Muhammed Ali, or Jackie Robinson, or Nancy Wilson, or Althea Gibson, all these celebrities could perform on Miami Beach, but they couldn't stay there. They had to stay here, and so, in memory of that period of history, that this was a very elegant place to just come and hang out, or to be. With integration coming in and black people [able to] go anywhere they want to go, it was like they forgot about the Hampton House because they were free to go other places. As a result, it became quite derelict. It was a Jewish couple that owned it, but even after they passed their children were not interested in it. Someone else bought it, but they just let it stay, and the interest wasn't there for preservation so it took the people who knew what it stood for, and who knew that this was a place where people could enjoy themselves and be first-class, and not worry about segregation. This is worthy of preservation because if you don't try to preserve it, people will never know what happened here. You'll forget it.

THOMPSON: Is there a historic marker? In Pennsylvania, we have plaques in front of historic places, even if they're not standing anymore.

PICKNEY: Well, we don't have a historic marker on it yet. However, we plan to put the original signs back that used to be out there.

THOMPSON: You have them?

PICKNEY: No, we are going to get them, they'll be replicated.



THOMPSON: (Offers a copy of the interview for the Historic Hampton House archives) let's maybe go back and for the last few minutes, circle back to Virginia Key. Are there any other memories that come to your mind that you associate with it, besides having your car stolen? That was probably traumatic.

PICKNEY: (Laughs)

THOMPSON: Can you explain the feelings you felt at Virginia Key Beach? What emotions or feelings does that experience evoke of the time that you spent there?

PICKNEY: We had picnics there where we took food. My background is Bahamian, so we would take pigeon peas and rice, and chicken, then potato salad, and the typical foods that we would have if we were at home, and eat out there. It was quite an enjoyable activity being on the beach and being in the water because I love the water.

THOMPSON: It was a special time, a special place, and this was from the time you were a young girl until you were, I guess, a young adult because you were driving.

PICKNEY: Yes, well you know the beach opened around '45. However, I never went over there. My parents wouldn't let me go. Before they had a bridge going over there, people would go over on the boat. I never went on the boat. (Laughs)

THOMPSON: The causeway had to be built?

PICKNEY: Yes.

THOMPSON: Is there anything else that I haven't asked you that you think would be important to state concerning south Florida and how it's changed? Are there any ways that it's the same? How has it remained the same?

PICKNEY: Well, I think that one of the things about South Florida that might be a little different than the rest of the South has been that there are certain people that white people would respect, like a lot of the Bahamians that came here. They got to know them and trust them, and they

would leave their belongings entrusted to them. They gave them jobs, some of them lived on the premises in servants' quarters. I know my parents did that and they stayed, for instance, on Miami Beach. My brother was born at 4609 Pantry Dr., Miami Beach, but they refused to put 'Miami Beach' on his birth certificate because he was black. The people that my father worked for entrusted him with staying there and taking care of their property, and then their friends would ask if he had other friends like him that they could trust with their belongings to work for them, and so he was able to get jobs for his other Bahamian friends. I think that has been an influence.

People like Father Culmer, who was a priest at St. Agnes Episcopal Church, could negotiate certain accomplishments with white people, for instance, the James E. Scott housing project. Father Gibson, Theodore Gibson, who was the priest at Christ Episcopal Church—when the Johns Committee wanted to know the members of the NAACP, he would not expose the membership list because he was afraid that they would lose their jobs if white people found out that they were members of the NAACP, so that, that problem went all the way to the Supreme Court and the court ruled that Father Gibson did not have to turn over his membership list to the Johns Committee. So you have had people like Father Gibson and Father Culmer to stand up and to take a stand that the white people respected, and I think that aspect of community development is not recognized. It has helped with the integration of Miami.

I remember that there was an article in the *Miami Herald* about someone, a pilot, not wanting to respect the Bahamian government or something, and so I wrote a letter to the *Herald* saying that the Bahamas is another country. It's not a part of the United States, and they have to learn how to respect the government. I got an invitation from Jim Batten, who was editor of the *Miami Herald*, asking me to come to lunch, and so I said okay. I went to lunch. I met him, and he wanted to know my background, so I said, "Well, I was born in Overtown." I gave him the address of where I was born, and he wanted to know about my parents. I said, "Well, they're both Bahamians," and then he said to me, "Oh, you are a sophisticated Bahamian." And I wondered, 'Why would he say that? Where did he get that from?' I just didn't know how much he knew, but then I said he had a reason to say that he knew something about the people, and so I think that has had an effect on the progress that Miami has made without a lot of the turmoil that has happened in other places.

THOMPSON: So, the Bahamians provided, I would say, a buffer zone. White people trusted Bahamians and they were able to help integrate because they could trust them.

PICKNEY: Yes. They made a mark, and also, with how they worked with their children to make sure they were educated.

THOMPSON: They had high standards for their children?

PICKNEY: Yes.

THOMPSON: Well, I think that pretty much concludes, I'll check the time. We've been going on for close to an hour so I think that's it. Great! (50:21)

(End of recording)

(New recording)

THOMPSON: So, you're going to tell me about Gregory Bush.

PICKNEY: Yes. Gregory Bush came to me and asked me, "What are we going to do about what the city plans to do with Virginia Key Beach?" I did not know what the city planned to do with Virginia Key Beach, and so he felt that somebody should be interested and find out about it. I said I was so busy with the [Miami] Circle that I wouldn't take up the leadership of that, but I thought that Mrs. Range should work on that because she had a lot of connections and people respected her. And so, he also contacted her and Gene Tinney, and he knew what was going on, but the black community did not know. We had no idea of what plans the city had for Virginia Key Beach, and it was Gregory Bush that actually caused us to get together to find out what the plans were, and then the city sort of denied that they had those plans. (Laughs)

THOMPSON: Interesting. They might have denied it, but they were in writing somewhere, so someone was able to discover their plans.

PICKNEY: Yes.

THOMPSON: And then how did it proceed from there?

PICKNEY: Well, Arteil was a city commissioner during that time, and he was the one that established the task force and then the trust.

THOMPSON: That was a crucial part of the process.

PICKNEY: Yes. (2:41)

(End of recording)

(New recording)

THOMPSON: So, we're talking about archiving information at the Hampton House.

PICKNEY: Yes. About two weeks ago we had a "history harvest" where we ask people in the community to bring in artifacts that we could take pictures of, and have as a part of our archives about the Hampton House and to also tell their stories that relate to the Hampton House, and we did do that.

THOMPSON: That's great. What was the most interesting artifact? Can you name a few interesting artifacts that came back here?

PICKNEY: Well, I didn't see all of them because I was out there greeting the people, but I know that Neal Adams' son and daughter came. He was a black Miami-Dade County Commissioner and he had a grocery store on Twenty-Seventh Avenue. His daughter brought a picture of him. He had some of the best meats in town. The people came from everywhere to buy his meats and collard greens and other things he had in the store, and she had a picture of him holding a lovely steak. (Laughs)

THOMPSON: Best meat around! Any other artifacts besides photographs? I saw a tote bag out in the lobby.

PICKNEY: Yes, that's what the people used to receive when they came here to stay in the hotel from the Hampton House.

THOMPSON: That very interesting that you have the artifacts and they're showcased. (2:26)