

Bailey Drive Gateway at Walnut Creek Wetland Park
Raleigh, NC

Transcript* of Phone Interview with **Elaine Peebles Brown**

Interviewed by Jackie Turner of J. Turner Consulting and Lindsey Naylor of Design Workshop
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**The following transcription is provided for reference only. Personal and unrelated conversation has been omitted from the transcript. The transcript has been edited for clarity by removing stuttering, start-and-stop sentences, and filler words such as “um,” “just,” “yeah” and “like.” Clarifying information is notated with [brackets]. Periodic time markers are provided in minutes:seconds format.*

Elaine Peebles Brown (EPB)

I go by Brown. I'm Elaine Peebles Brown, but a lot of people, including Carrie, just call me Peebles. You know it really doesn't matter because I've been divorced for many years but I never went back to my maiden name. So I've been Elaine Peebles Brown for 50 years.

Jackie Turner (JT)

02:59

Okay, so one of the things that we wanted to cover, to hear about is your father, and your mother as well. I think you told me that you have lived there all your life?

EPB

03:33

No I have not. We moved. I think I told you this is the first African American subdivision in Raleigh. The first one, and my dad was a masonry contractor, fairly large and well-known contractor.

JT

03:52

What's his name?

EPB

03:56

Millard R. Peebles. Middle initial 'R' for Roosevelt Peebles. And he has a couple of cousins named Millard Peebles so there's a lot, but he's Millard R. Peebles, Senior. And I do have a brother who has lived in Raleigh most of his life, and he's Millard R. Peebles, Junior. His nickname is Pete, and most people, even professionally, everybody at Fox 50 Capital broadcasting, they all know he's Pete.

So we moved here when I was nine years old. We moved here in June of 1957, because my dad was the masonry contractor who built most of the homes in Rochester Heights. Calloway Drive was the first street — these were the premier lots, these are double lots, these are larger lots than most of them, many — he completed our home first. So we were the first family to move in. We were the first home to be completed, and we were the first ones, and we moved in on June 13, 1957.

JT: 05:10

Wow.

EPB

I was a little girl, you know, I was nine years old, but when I left in 1966 to go to college, I didn't live here again until December 1st of the year 2000, when I moved back in with my mom. Then I had lived in Hampton, Virginia, in Poughkeepsie, New York, and then I came back at the end of the year 2000. I hadn't lived here in 34 years, so I had to get used to a lot of things. I had just visited here on, you know, weekends and holidays and special occasions. That kind of thing.

JT

05:50

I had another question about the subdivision. I don't know if you are aware but one of the things that we did, and I'd be glad to share this in an email with you, is we researched - Lindsey's team and her colleagues found the nomination for the neighborhood to be listed on the local historic district register. And it mentioned that several of the streets were named after prominent African Americans in the mid to late fifties. And so we actually prepared an exhibit to take to the meetings, where we went through all the streets of Rochester Heights and Biltmore Hills and did a little blurb on them. We found names, the references for each of the streets except for I think Hadley and Boaz and one other, and we've been wondering if maybe Hadley had something to do with the contractor or the designers or something.

EPB:

No, no, because none of the names were for local people, and they were not named for people current at that time. They were for people who were already held in high esteem. Pearl Bailey was a famous singer and entertainer, and Don — somebody, what's his — Newcombe was a ball player. And Cab Calloway. So they were not people who were even — I don't know that many of them were even alive in the 50s, they were people that were already memorialized.

07:35

But I don't remember — my mother, who was an English teacher, grew up with her telling us stories, but I never remember any stories about Hadley or Boaz. Look, if she knew it she would have told it. If anybody knew it, she knew it.

JT

07:57

So tell us about your impression and your days growing up like between '57 and '66. What the neighborhood itself was like and then also the broader area of South Raleigh was like in your experience.

EPB

08:16

Well this was. First of all, my family moved here from South Person Street, and, you know, it's about two miles from here, but this section had to be annexed. This was not a part of the city of Raleigh. This had to be annexed before the subdivision could be completed. So, you know, my dad was all involved in things like that. My dad was the first African American on the City of Raleigh Planning Commission. And they did a spread on him in the Raleigh Times in June of, 1957, I believe, half a page spread on him in the Raleigh Times.

09:01

I don't remember what years he served on the planning commission. I'm sorry. They did a spread on him in the summer of 1977 or 78 because he passed in '78. He was always involved in figuring out who was going to be where and, you know, what streets needed to be cut through, and that kind of thing. So at first this was the country. This was, probably unincorporated Wake County, I would imagine. And so the city of Raleigh boundaries you know was further up Garner Road. And so when we moved here — and you would say, people would say, they would reference: “moved *out* here” — when we moved *out* here, this was a new, like I said, this was a new concept because I guess the people who had come home from the war, had come home just in the 40s.

10:02

And my dad came home from World War II and went to Hampton Institute to get a building construction degree in the mid 40s. But he didn't stay there long. Because he met my mom and married my mom a year later, brought her to Raleigh and bought her a home on Person Street and then started his own business.

So when we moved here, on Calloway Drive, this was a show place. People couldn't believe it. People just rode, people would just ride, you know, like your Sunday afternoon rides, people would ride here to see what was going on, what this was like, all these big beautiful homes. Because, you know, that's what it was, it was new to them. It was new for black people owning their own homes, brick homes. Yeah.

10:45

And see because this area was all woods, and it was owned by a black family, they had to clear the woods.

11:05

It was owned by the family — the Lightners. And so they had to clear the land to build these homes. We actually had to go to each lot and pick out what trees we wanted to keep and which

trees we wanted to cut down. So I'm the house at the end — I'm 721 Calloway, and there's just one home beyond my home on this side of the street, that's 801 Calloway Drive, and when they were building that home, we found a 40-pound turtle. I didn't know turtles grew that big, but we found a 40-pound turtle.

11:43

So it was, you know, that was, for children that was really, that was really something.

11:49

But because my dad was building these homes, and because his business was building homes all over Raleigh and in this part of the state, he had different crews, and he wasn't personally building on our home every day. But every single day while it was being built, we drove from Person Street to Calloway Drive to look and see what was going on. All that anticipation.

JT

12:18

Now what school did you go to during those years?

EPB

I went to Saint Monica's. My sister is 14 months younger than I am and our brother is eight and nine years younger than we are. So my brother was in the first class of Fuller School right here in our neighborhood. My sister and I went to Saint Monica's. And that — you know, back then in the late fifties, if your birthday came late and if you could pass a test, then your parents could pay the tuition and you could go to the Catholic school even if you weren't Catholic, because back then that was the best school in the city. And that's where we went to school.

JT

13:12

Now in the Catholic school, I'm just curious given the times, was it integrated?

EPB

Oh no. Oh no. No, no. It was a school full of, a school full of Black children, and all the nuns and priests were white.

JT

13:35

Oh okay.

EPB

13:36

And they taught us, if your parents had extra eight or \$10 a week, I don't remember what it was then, you could take piano lessons after school. So I took piano lessons at the convent, you know, which was on the property right by where the _____ is now.

So we took piano lessons. We were in a choir, you know like a glee club. We did all kinds of things because we, that was the creme de la creme in terms of education. Yeah they didn't have these so called, you know, private schools like Ravenscroft. Well I don't know about Ravenscroft, but they didn't have private. Even though it was a parochial school, that was the closest thing to a private school for this community.

14:26

That's where we went to the eighth grade. So I went to the eighth grade at Saint Monica's and then I went to the end of the year at Ligon High School. Then I graduated from Ligon High School in 1966. My sister graduated from Ligon High School in 1968.

JT: Okay

14:49

So your dad's career continued in the construction industry and then also land planning being on the Planning Commission. Before we get on to your mother, anything else that you want to tell us about him?

15:10

Did you all know it was kind of the country?

15:15

Did you ever go from Calloway Street and then go down the hill a little bit to Bailey Drive? I'm not sure if those homes followed yours by two or three years — I know it was sort of between 1957, 1958 or '59 that those were built. Did you ever go to the end of the street? Was it a wetland? They probably didn't use the term wetland.

EPB

15:39

No they didn't. We went from the top of this hill on Calloway to the bottom of the hill where the stop sign is, on sleds when it was snow. Because that was a big deal, you know, because this is a nice hill. And so we did that and then we rode bicycles down Boaz to Bailey Drive. And then we had cousins who lived on Bailey Drive. The first home on Bailey Drive when you come down Garner Road and make a left turn into the subdivision. There's a brick sign there that says Rochester Heights. Well that was my dad's sister's home, and my dad employed his brother in law, which was his sister's husband. And they, and they moved there probably around 1959 or '60. And, he was, you know a brick mason. My dad trained him, and he became one of the best, one of the most highly skilled brick masons. So he worked for my dad during the week, and then on the weekends he built barbecue pits and patios and retaining walls, you know, look, all around Raleigh and Cary.

16:58

But I don't remember, ah, I don't remember the, I never heard the term 'wetland' until I moved back.

JT

17:06

Yeah, or swamp and certainly I wouldn't have played down there myself and [can't] figure out how the 40 pound turtle got up the hill.

EPB

Yeah I don't know where he came from that was you know only wood.

17:22

JT

So tell us a little bit about just your mother's role. Your parents met and then moved from Hampton on down to here. And so your mom's from Virginia?

EPB

My mom was from Danville, Virginia. And so she went to Hampton and she graduated from Hampton in the spring of '47. And she married my dad in August of '47. And so my dad was behind her. You know, she was, she was a senior; he was probably just coming in because he was going to school on the GI Bill because he had been to the war. And when they married, they came to Raleigh to live. And my mother and my dad bought a home on Person Street. And my mother that first year she taught somewhere in rural Virginia, I think she taught in Farmville, Virginia. And she taught, where she, where, you know, you lived in, in that town from Monday through Friday, and then she came home on the weekends. She was home from Friday evening to Monday morning. And she just did that for, she just did that for one year. And then, by the second year, she was pregnant with me, and she did substitute teaching for, for years because she didn't work full time when my sister and I were in school, were little. She didn't work full time, she didn't go back to teaching full time until my brother was in kindergarten. So what she did, [was] she ran my dad's business from the kitchen. And then when his business got so big then, then he moved his office in the basement of our home for several years, and he paid a secretary. My mother went to work, and he paid a secretary full time to be a secretary for his business. And then he bought a building downtown on Person, the corner of Person and Davies, Person and Cabarrus right next to where the parking lot is at Davie Street Presbyterian Church, where the parking lot of my dad's building, Cabarrus and Davie run parallel to one another. So you just one way going into town and if you are on Person Street, as soon as you cross over Cabarrus Street, right there on the right.

20:16

There was a large old home that he bought. It's like a two story frame home. And he bought that building and renovated it for his office place. That's where his office was until he passed in 1978. Because by the time he passed away he had probably five trucks and he employed over 100 people. So he had his business. All the, you know the trucks and everything was stationed there instead of at home.

JT

20:50

Okay. Now you mentioned that your mom at some point she went back to work with the new Carnage Middle School?

20:59

EPB

21:03

So she taught, she worked for a while at Garner Consolidated and then Fuquay Consolidated and then I believe her first assignment in Raleigh (because Raleigh and Wake County school districts were separate then).

21:21

They were not merged. They were not merged. Not just integrated racially — they were two separate systems in Raleigh. And so she was hired to be the first English teacher at Carnage High School, not Carnage High School, I mean, I'm sorry, Carnage Middle School. Then when Carnage wasn't completed the year that she was hired, so she was at Ligon High School for one year. So, like, school year of 1964 to 65 in my junior year of high school.

And then when Carnage opened up at the school year '65 to '66 she taught there, and so did several other neighbors here.

JT

22:14

Yeah, so then she was at Carnage, and now we're talking 50 years ago that Carnage opened up. I'm just curious about some of the things that your mom and your dad, before she passed, might have said about the neighborhood. Were they pleased with the way the neighborhood settled and living there and their friends were there?

EPB

Oh yeah, they were very pleased. They were proud. They were proud. Because, I mean, you live in the first black subdivision and you built it, too? And everybody, people were, people all over the city were striving to achieve that.

And then when there was some issues with the developers, and the developers wanted to build less expensive homes. They changed developers, they switched to another developer, and then when they built Biltmore Hills, those homes were smaller homes, and they didn't have the same quality. Very nice homes but they didn't have a quality that these homes had.

JT

23:53

I know you mentioned that your dad went to Hampton on the GI Bill. Was the GI bill used to provide, I probably should know my history, housing assistance such as down payments and that sort of thing?

EPB

24:21

Oh no. I don't — no, there was none of that stuff. Oh no. If you bought a house you had to have cash. There was nobody, there was nobody helping, nobody saying, like this down payment assistance. Oh no. Absolutely not, because there are families, there were families here, I'm looking out my window. There are families, at least one family that I can think of, where the parents were. Because on this street, on Calloway Drive, from the stop sign on up, these families were all educators. They were all educated, and most of them were educators. And then the first block — what we call the 500 block when you first turn in — in the 500 block was a little different. But from the stop sign up, all of these families were educated people, and both parents, both parents worked.

25:29

And there was one family that I can think of that the parents were not educated, and they had what we called a lot of children — six children was considered a lot of children. So, but anyway they had six children. But those parents worked between two and three jobs each. The mom then the dad, the dad worked three jobs, the mom worked three jobs. They would clean office buildings downtown, and then they'd be, working in somebody's kitchen, but that was just the true test of work ethic in terms of how determined black people were to have a home of their own.

JT

And especially in that nice neighborhood

EPB

26:26

And so that family where those parents worked for three jobs each — that home is still in that family. Carrie — the Hicks? That home is still, so Carrie's son is, I think she said the fifth generation. Let's see — Mr. Hicks, Roy Junior, Gilley and Cameron — he's the fourth generation to have lived, to live in that home. And I remember, I know them all from the very, from the very first which would have been his great grandfather.

27:06

But they worked three jobs. They worked all the time. They literally worked their fingers to the bone. And they were not educated, but they sent all of their children to college.

JT

27:18

Wow. Yeah that's a real testament to just being dedicated to making a better life for your family.

EPB

27:29

There was no assistance. No way. I don't know if you had some assistance, it might have been the rare instances where someone had a relative to list them you know \$1000. But in terms of any government assistance that's unheard of, that didn't exist.

JT

Okay Lindsey, do you have some questions?

Lindsey Naylor (LN)

27:58

I was curious, I had read about how in the sort of earliest days of the neighborhoods there was, I had read that it was really sort of vibrant socially and that also there were a lot of people who were taking part in the civil rights movement of the time. And I would just be curious to hear what your perceptions of that were when you were a child growing up.

EPB

28:24

Well my mom came from a family that was a family of social activists and civil rights activists and like I said she was from Virginia. But all of her siblings — so it was just in her blood. So my mother was an activist, and I guess my dad, I guess some of it rubbed off on my dad. So they had different kinds of involvements, because my dad was in the Mason and the Shriners and my mom was active in Martin Street Baptist Church, and my dad was active in Baptist Grove Church, which is now in the city but back then it was the country. But, they were both active. And, you know, they had influence.

Then next door to us, and the family is still there, is the Mitchell family. Well it's now the Blalock family, but Sam, Samuel Mitchell was a well known civil rights attorney. He was known all over the state of North Carolina. He did a lot of pro bono work and civil rights cases. And so he lived next door to us, and his wife was an educator. His wife is in a nursing home now, but his daughter and son-in-law still live there.

So we were always, I mean it was always — if it was a march or a protest or a boycott or that kind of thing. Because when we went to St. Monica's School, my mom always took us and picked us up. But I guess by the time we got in 6th and 7th grade and she was working full time, we had a chance to ride — we thought we were grown, being we could ride the city bus — because they didn't have, you know, there were no school buses to go to St. Monica's. So we would ride the city bus. And so we would get the city bus at the bottom of the hill where the stop sign is, by Miss Jackson's house. And we would ride there. And at that time I was the oldest child. All the other families who moved on this street were a couple of years younger, and their children were younger. Most of their children were my brother's age. But when we rode the bus there, we had to transfer downtown on Martin Street, where the post office is.

And one day the bus driver told us to go to the back of the bus. And I said, 'No, we refuse.' And all the other kids who had gotten on in Rochester Heights with me, they followed me because I was a big kid. And I said, 'No don't, don't give up your seat. Don't go to the back of the bus.' And so I led that first little boycott. And then when we got to school, and the nuns called our parents and told them what a terrible thing we had done — that's the first and the only time in my life I can ever remember that I did something that was supposedly wrong, and then my parents upheld me.

I thought, hmm this must be pretty good. Because this is all, this is all I could see. This is what I was seeing my mom do, my mom's siblings were civil rights attorneys in other cities, and my mom's sister was a civil rights attorney on a national level, she was all in the magazines, in the newspaper. So that's all I knew. I said, 'No, we're not going to the back of the bus.'

JT

31:51

Yeah. Oh wow!

EPB

31:55

So yeah that was what we did, you know. And next door — back then they called the attorneys, you know, 'Lawyer Mitchell.' If Lawyer Mitchell was working on a case and he needed help, or if my parents knew of somebody that was being mistreated, then you went to Lawyer Mitchell. And if it was something that he felt was worthy, then he'd file suit, it would be in the newspaper and be on WRAL, on television.

JT

Lindsey, did you have anything else?

LN

Well I'm kind of curious to know if, given that you grew up in the neighborhood and then came back a few decades later, you could talk about some of the differences in terms of even just the life on the street in the neighborhood, or what it was like to come back to the neighborhood and anything that struck you about how that has changed.

EPB

32:57

Yeah, well one of the things that changed about it [the neighborhood] is that, of course, it's 30 or 40 years gone by. People, you know, original owners die out and pass away. And in many instances their children lived out of state and they weren't interested in maintaining the property, and so that's how some of the properties transferred to rental properties. Because this, you know the kind of pride that we had in this neighborhood and the fact that you never find a piece of paper on the street and you never hear and you never see dogs running the streets without

being on the leash, and you never see grass growing up. With modern day homes have covenants but what modern subdivisions require and write down in a covenant, we never have had any of that. That was just unspoken and unwritten because you just didn't do things to the value of your property and you didn't do things that disgraced your neighborhood.

34:20

But you know if you turn to rentals it becomes a little different because sometimes something's going on in the home and you don't get to report it to the person who owns it or you just say, well, you know, there's a broken fence there. Oh well, getting broken, it'll fix itself. And so sometimes actually you could turn, when I came back, I could turn into the neighborhood and I could tell which homes had the original owners and which ones have become rentals, because some have rentals and some have been bought and sold two or three times within a 40-year period.

...

38:00

We're very proud of the fact that every home on this block, just about every home on this block has gone to descendants. And we had two couples who did not have any children and didn't have any nieces or nephews who lived anywhere near North Carolina. But they just happened to have their homes with someone who has the same amount of pride that we have.

And so we do have things that you know, at Christmas time, at Christmas Eve we all used to light the bags with the luminaries, the candles inside, and take pictures of those. And sometimes the TV station would come out. And then every year, July the fourth, we'd all go from one home to another and we'd all have a barbecue or a picnic. Those are the kinds of things that we did here on Calloway. And I guess because it was the early, the oldest street and people who had been connected the longest. Then we just had that kind of relationship. And now we're in the next generation. We're doing that now — we're, we're in our sixties — I'm the only one who's 70, and they're in their sixties — and we're doing the same thing now, you know, starting a new tradition. Like a dinner on Christmas, the Friday night before Christmas.

...

EPB

49:39

Well it really makes us feel good, when we see that somebody recognizes work that our parents did, especially when it was years ago, because, that's all you have is your memories. And I still meet people — my dad's been deceased for 40 years, my mom's been deceased for three and a half years — and I still meet people who were influenced by my parents, and I never knew it. And some of them are people I know. 'Oh, your mom, your mom bought my, you know, your mom gave me a baby shower when I was a teller at the bank, and she gave me a baby shower

when I was pregnant with my first child, and that child is now on Broadway.' And I'm like, oh, this is really nice, my mom did that for you?

Y'all have a great day. I know I've taken up all your time, but this is really kind of exciting.

JT

50:23

Thank you. We'll follow up with you.

EPB

All right. Bye-bye. Have a good day both of you. Bye bye to you too.