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Folklife Archives, Manuscripts &, "Interview with Walter Francis Becket, 1898-1991 (FA 114)" (1991).

Folklife Archives Oral Histories. Paper 392.

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INTERVIEW WITH WALTER FRANCIS BECKET, M.D.

Interviewer: John E. Long, Department of Philosophy & Religion, WKU

Date: Monday, 28 January 1991

Place: Dr. Becket's home, Scottsville Road, Bowling Green, KY

Time: Approximately 2:30 PM

Reason for Interview: To collect at least certain basic information about Dr. Becket as the University Libraries prepare to honor him as part of the observance of Black History Month, 1991.

Also Present: Mrs. Helen Becket Murray, one of Dr. Becket's daughters

I. Today is the 28th of January, and I'm talking to Dr. W. F. Becket, retired physician of Bowling Green, KY. The time is approximately 2:30 in the afternoon.

I. Well, Dr. Becket, uh, first of all, will you please tell us where you were born and when?

B. Let's see, I was born in Providence, Rhode Island.

I. Alright, born in Providence--.

B. January the 24th.

I. Well, we're just past your birthday, congratulations! [laughs] How old are you now?

B. Well, let's see. As near as I can figure, I'm- [long silence] Let's see. You want my birthday?

I. Well, okay, uh yes, or what--just the year that you were born, that'll be helpful too, the year that you were born.

B. I was born January the 20th, the 20th, 8th I think

I. Alright.

B. Or the 4th, I don't know whether it was the 28th or the 24th.

I. Okay. About what year?

B. Unh, let's see. [addressing his daughter] Do you know what year I was born in?

I. [laughs; daughter laughs in background]

[Daughter responds from background] [unintelligible] He just celebrated his 93rd birthday.

I. Alright. 93rd birthday. Alright. Well we can count back and figure out what year that will be. Congratulations to you, sir.

B. Thank you.

I. Congratulations. You say you were born in Providence, Rhode Island.

B. That's right.

I. Alright, uh, your father and mother, were they, uh, were they physi-, was your father in the medical field, or-?

B. No.

I. No?

B. No. For many years he was a, a, what do you call these men who carry the mail around. They have a, they are given a, a route?

I. Postmen?

B. Postmen. He was a Postman.

I. Alright, fine.

B. Yeah, he was a Postman for many years.

I. Wonderful. Alright. And your mother, was she, uh, what they call now a Domestic Engineer? Was she a housewife? [laughs]

B. A housewife.

I. Alright. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

B. Yes.

I. Ohh, how many?

B. Let's see, I think I had, uh, one sister, and I think sh-, her name was, I think, Elnora.

I. Elnora.

B. Elnora, yeah.

I. Alright.

B. And she was a school teacher and a piano player.

I. [laughs] Alright. How about your, uh, did you have any bro-, uh, brothers, excuse me, did you have any brothers?

B. Yes, yes, I had brothers.

I. Mm hmm.

- B. I had, uh, my oldest brother was, uh, George [coughs]. The next one to him was Humphrey.
- I. George, Humphrey.
- B. [coughs] And then, uh, then the one next to Humphrey was uh- [pause] Humphrey, let's see, Humphrey. [pause] Who was that? [long pause] Oh, he was Edward.
- I. Alright.
- B. That's right, he was Edward.
- I. Alright, wonderful. Were you the youngest in this?
- B. No. And then, uh, Edward, then I had one under Edward, Maurice.
- I. Maurice.
- B. Mau-, Maurice. Maurice, Maurice. And that winds them up.
- I. That winds them up. Alright. Where were you in this? Were you the oldest, or-?
- B. Hmm?
- I. Were you the oldest child?
- B. Oh no.
- I. Where were you in the uh-?
- B. No. Uh, George Becket was the oldest.
- I. George was the oldest.
- B. And he did for a livelihood, he was-, worked in the post office, as a carrier.
- I. Postal service as a carrier.
- B. As a carrier.
- I. Alright.
- B. And he carried, uh, uh, mail many years, man-, many years.
- I. Very good.
- B. And he had a nice route, among people who were [pause] in good financial circumstances.

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I. Very good. Alright. Well let's see, were you, if you were not, you were not the oldest, your brother George was the oldest, were you the second or the third?

B. No, no, let's see. Uh, the oldest was George Becket.

I. Um hmm, um hmm.

B. Uh, then, then there followed, uh, let's see [pause] George, [long pause], [unintelligible] My father was, was George Edward Becket.

I. Mm hmm.

B. Mm hmm. Then the first son was named George.

I. Right.

B. George. George Edward Becket.

I. Okay.

B. Mm hmm. Then, uh-

I. We have Humphrey.

B. Then Humphrey.

I. Right.

B. Humphrey cot-, came after Geor-, after-.

I. After George.

B. After George, and then I came.

I. And then you came. Okay, so you're the third child. Alright. Now, one question, Dr. Becket, uh, I have only seen your name written as W. F. What is your full name?

B. Walter Francis.

I. Walter Francis. Okay. [pause] Wonderful. Now, let me ask you some questions about your education and, and your career as a physician. Um, first of all, what influenced you, as you can recall, to become a doctor?

B. Mmm. Well now I want-, I wanted to become something worthwhile.

I. Okay. [laughs]

B. That's about all I can say.

I. Alright. That's fine, that's perfectly fine. You did all of your schooling in Rhode Island, or-?

B. Yes.

I. Okay. So you went to elementary school and I guess they had a junior high school system, and-

B. They had, um, oh, the grade school, what they call the grammar.

I. Alright, grammar school.

B. And, I, then I went into-, then I went into the, uh- [pause] [unintelligible] known as the grade school.

I. Alrighty, alright.

B. Grade school, the grammar school. And then uh-

I. Then after that you, I guess, went on to high school.

B. I went to high school.

I. Right.

B. After the grammar school.

I. Correct.

B. I think that's all.

I. Alright. And then, how about college?

B. Well, [pause], uh, first, uh, [pause] I went to, uh, Hope Street High School.

I. Okay, Hope Street High School.

B. Yes. I went there before I went to college.

I. Alright.

B. And then following that I went to Brown University.

I. Okay. Were you-, uh, did you study-, well, I should ask you did you major in, uh, biology or chemistry or, what was your major, if you can recall?

B. Oh, I don't remember what my major was-

I. That's okay.

B. -when I was in college.

I. Alright. And then after that I believe you went to Meharry Medical School, am I right? Medical College.

B. I, uh, I applied [pause] I applied to Meharry Medical College and was accepted.

I. Alright. And, uh, after you went to Meharry, uh, how did you decide to practice medicine here in Bowling Green?

B. Because that was where I was born and I had friends here.

I. You were born in Bowling Green?

B. Sure.

I. I didn't know that. [laughs]

B. Where'd you think I was born?

I. Well I thought you might have been born in Providence, Rhode Island.

B. Oh, wait a minute. Wait just a minute. Maybe I'm confused a little.

I. Okay.

B. [pause] I'm, [long pause] Probably was in Franklin, Franklin, Kentucky.

I. Okay, that's where you were born, in Franklin, Kentucky?

[Daughter in background] No.

I. Oh, alright. [laughs] I'll ask you, Mrs. Murray.

[Daughter] He migrated from Nashville to Franklin, Kentucky, and then to Bowling Green.

I. Okay. So that was after medical school?

[Daughter] After medical school.

I. After medical school. Okay. Uh, uh, did you-, did he start practicing in Franklin, Kentucky first?

[Daughter] Franklin, Kentucky.

I. I mean he started his practice there first?

[Daughter] Right.

I. Okay. Migrated to Franklin. [pause] Well, uh, what was it like, uh, to practice medicine when you finished, uh, Meharry?

B. Well, it was something that I enjoyed doing.

I. Okay.

B. That's about all I can say.

I. Alright, alright. Did you have, uh, much difficulty of any kind? Were there problems for you trying to practice medicine at that time? Was there much in the way of hospitals--I should even ask that. How about hospitals? Were there many hospitals?

B. Hospitals? Mm hmm. I, after I got my medical degree, umm- [pause] [coughs] Give me a tissue paper, please.

I. Alrighty. [long pause] Let's stop that [i.e., the tape recorder] for a moment.

[Dr. Becket needed to expectorate. During this pause I talked with his daughter, Mrs. Helen Becket Murray, who did not wish to be recorded at this time. Mrs. Murray informed me that Dr. Becket was the first Black doctor to practice at the hospital in Bowling Green, the Bowling Green/Warren County Hospital. He also serviced the surrounding small communities. At that time, it was the custom that Black women gave birth in their homes. Dr. Becket was the first Black physician to deliver Black babies in the hospital. There was a write up in the local newspaper reporting that Dr. Becket was on the staff at the hospital. It was then that Black mothers started coming to the hospital for their deliveries. This was in the late 30's or early 40's.

When the tape recorder was turned on again, Dr. Becket was speaking about how difficult it was for him to get through school because of lack of money.]

B. I was determined to go to college. And I didn't have the necessary funds. So I decided to work.

I. Alright.

B. So I worked, and worked hard. And worked hard. Umm, es-, especially in the su-, in the summer month, months.

I. Um hmm.

B. [pause] And, uh, the stores, in Bowlin-, Bowlin-, Bowling Green, Kentucky, uh, gave us employment. [telephone rings in background] That helped us a whole lot to get through.

I. Mm hmm. What kind of work did you do?

- B. Umm, [pause] cleaning up the store [pause] and that type of thing.
- I. Okay. That was probably in Providence, rather than Bowling Green, I guess.
- B. That was in Providence.
- I. In Providence, yes sir. If you went to school in Providence. Yes.
- B. Then, when I-, after I finished [unintelligible], I, I decided that I would, uh, try going to college, but I didn't have any funds. So I decided to work. So there was a large store in Washington, D. C., and they gave me work, there, in that store. [pause] And [pause] everywhere I would turn there was a job waiting for me.
- I. Mm hmm.
- B. I enjoyed working. Because I knew that that would be the only way that I could get through college.
- I. Very good, very good. Very, very good.
- B. It was the only way.
- I. The only way. Very, very good. Wonderful.
- B. In other words, I just had to work my way through, uh, as best I could.
- I. Okay, okay. [pause] Uh, did you, did you finish in four years, or did it take you longer than four years to finish?
- B. [pause] I think it took me a little over four years.
- I. Mm hmm.
- B. Yes.
- I. Alright, alright. When you, uh, came to Bowling Green, when you, when you finished medical school at, uh, at Meharry and then came to, uh, I guess first Franklin, and then from Franklin to Bowling Green-
- B. That's right.
- I. -uh, uh, what kinds of, what kinds of, uh, uh, things did you find that the people needed?
- B. Just about the same things that the other citizens needed.
- I. Okay. [laughs]
- B. They had, uh, most of them that I waited on, most of the colored

families had children.

I. Mm hmm.

B. They had children. [pause] We had three [unintelligible] Baptist [pause] churches.

I. Mm hmm.

B. And we had, uh, two or three outstanding Methodist churches.

I. Mm hmm.

B. And I was a Methodist, I went to the Methodist church. I taught school there at that [unintelligible].

I. Alright. Very good. Wonderful. And do you have any, uh, any stories you can recollect you may want to tell us?

B. Any what?

I. Any stories, kind of funny stories, sometimes?

B. No, no I don't know that I have any. All I know is [pause] that, uh, it wasn't an easy job, to get through.

I. Mmm. Mmm.

B. I had to work my way through. [pause]

I. And you succeeded.

B. Hmm?

I. You succeeded.

B. Yeah. It was always somebody waiting to give me a job.

I. Tremendous. Tremendous. Well, I'm not going to tire you out any, Dr. Becket. But I just want to thank you for your time; for giving me this time this afternoon. And I want to thank you for the words that you shared with us. That'll be very very helpful to us. And we hope that, uh, when the twenty fourth comes you'll be able to join us, but if not, we understand [laughs].

B. [laughs]

I. But thank you so very very much, sir. Thank you.

[Once the tape recorder was turned off, Mrs. Murray informed me that Dr. Becket used to be full of stories, but he may have forgotten them now. She informed me that during the summers of the years that Dr. Becket was

a student at Meharry, he worked as a Red Cap at a train station in Cincinnati.

Dr. Becket met his wife, Annie Mae Dunson Becket, a native of Nashville, TN, while he was a student at Meharry. When the family moved to Bowling Green, it resided at 529 Chestnut Street (essentially the corner of 6th and Chestnut, now a car lot where hearses are parked). Mrs. Becket taught at the State Street High School.]

NOTES ON DR. WALTER FRANCIS BECKET

PERSONAL

Born January 24, 1898 in Providence, Rhode Island, the third of six children born to Mr. and Mrs. George Edward Becket.

Married to the late Mrs. Annie Mae Dunson Becket. Mrs. Becket was a native of Nashville, TN. Dr. Becket met her while he was a student at Meharry. They are the parents of three daughters: Ms Miomata Leveston of Louisville, KY, Ms Greta Murray of St. Louis, Missouri, and Ms Helen Murray of Chicago, Illinois.

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

Attended the Thayer Street Elementary School, the Hope Street High School, and Brown University, all in Providence. He then attended Meharry Medical College from which he graduated in 1928.

MEDICAL CAREER

Upon completing medical school, Dr. Becket moved from Nashville, TN, to Franklin, KY where he set up his first practice. He then moved his practice from Franklin to Bowling Green where he became the first African American Dr. to practice at the hospital in Bowling Green--the Bowling Green/Warren County Hospital--and to be on the staff of the hospital. He also served the surrounding small communities.

RECOGNITIONS AND HONORS

1974--by the Afro-American Studies Program of Western Kentucky University in recognition of 30 years of dedicated service to the Bowling Green community.

1976--an award (source not named) for outstanding humanitarian work

1978--by Meharry Medical College, the Presidents Award for 50 years of service to mankind

1978--by Cottage Chapel Seventh Day Adventist Church, Bowling Green, KY, in appreciation for 50 years of dedicated service 1928-1978

1981--by HCA Greenview Hospital, a dedication to Dr. Becket in recognition of years of service and support

1987--by Taylor Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church for Christ-like service rendered to the Church

1988--by the Prince Hall Masons, the Black Achievement Award for

outstanding medical service.

NAMES AND ADDRESSES OF FAMILY MEMBERS

DAUGHTERS

Ms. Miomata Leveston
9119 Mellowridge Court
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Ms. Helen Murray
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