

Edward Jackson - March 9 & 11, 1976

I: My name is Janet Franklin. Today I'm interviewing Edward Jackson. This interview took place on two different dates, March 9 and March 11. Edward Jackson lives at 66 Camp Street.

Q: Edward, what time were you first in Middletown? What made you come, and how was the city like then?

A: I arrived in Middletown around 1942 and the reason why I came to Middletown, I came here from Brooklyn, New York, and the reason I came here was in search of employment. Things at that time weren't very good in New York City as far as employment wise was concerned and I heard of this wonderful State of Connecticut where they had defense jobs and defense factories. The people were making such a large amount of money at that time, \$55.00 a week, and I figured that Middletown or, not Middletown, but Connecticut itself would be the place for me to come in order to get employment. I arrived here in 1943, no, the last part of '42, and coming from Brooklyn, New York, to a small town like Middletown, it took a lot of adjusting to do. In fact, the first month I was here I couldn't sleep because there wasn't enough noise in the street. In Brooklyn where you had a fire engine running by your door or a policeman's siren blowing, that was all music to my ears at the time and I was very used to it. But here when I would hear crickets out in the pond, I couldn't sleep because it was too, too quiet. Well, the employment situation in Middletown for a black person wasn't very good in the 1940's. This was just before the Second World War and defense factories were just opening up. I can remember very good at the time when I went for employment around here that the people in this area, in the Middletown area, were very clannish. You had to be a native of Middletown before you could get any kind of employment and being a black person out of New York City, they took a very dim view of that. They were very suspicious of anybody that didn't come from the New England section, especially around Middletown or the Connecticut area. I know in several places I went and put my application in and I didn't get any results from it, and I come to find out later on that they weren't hiring black people in many of these factories around this area. I finally got a job in Meriden. I kept it there. I worked there as a maintenance man for a while until I finally got a job as a machine operator a few years later. Then when I did eventually move back to Middletown, the first good job that I got here I was working in construction and I think it was when they was building the Federal project out in Silver Street. I was working as a laborer at that time. Later I began working on two or three jobs in order to supplement my weekly income. Of course, I had a family living in New York City. I found out at the time that of the black people that were living in the Middletown area they was only two black people working in the factories in Middletown. One was a person by the name of Warmsley and he worked for Wilcox & Crittenden. The Warmsleys were a very old family in Middletown, had been here for years, and Mr. Warmsley, at the time, had been working in the Wilcox for quite a long time. The other person that was working in the Russell Company was Mr. McArthur and the McArthur families were natives of Middletown and he had a pretty good job in the Russell Company. Later on when the labor shortage really hit Middletown, many of us were being drafted for Armed Services; then that's when the opportunities opened up for black people for the various factory jobs here and then they had to start at the bottom of the

heap, mostly in the labor area. Speaking of conditions, I remember working in one of the factories in town where, now this was back in the 1940's, 1942 or '43, and we're talking about New England area, and I remember at the time that they had segregated bathroom facilities for blacks and for whites. And it seems very strange to be talking about that now because it doesn't seem possible that during that time that these things were happening in Middletown, but it was so. A little later the NAACP, a branch was formed in Portland, Connecticut, and it was combined with the people in Middletown, so it was called the Portland-Middletown Branch of the NAACP. And the reason why that this organization came in existence around here was because of the conditions that the black people in the area were experiencing in the Middletown area, and they did a pretty good job around Middletown. If I can sort of reach back in my memory, I think at the time that the housing project was set up there were no provisions made at the time to take care of the black residents in Middletown, those that needed housing at that time. And the NAACP and several prominent people in Middletown, I think Reverend Alvin Johnson from the First Baptist Church on Main and William Streets, Mrs. Cora Jackson from the Bureau, the Council of Social Agencies, I believe, and several members from the NAACP met and, by their insistence, black people were allowed to occupy two units in the federal project at the time that they had opened up in Middletown, and that was on State Terrace. And later the same organization had to have several meetings with members of the Housing Authority and Federal officers from the Federal Regional Office in Boston in order to integrate the project entirely. Later, after several meetings, not only the project in Silver Street, the federal project in Silver Street, but all the projects in Middletown were integrated. In fact, at that time the selection of members to go into the project, I think with (Rockwood) Acres, was selected by the Middletown-Portland Branch of the NAACP and they was working together with the Housing Authority to make sure that the families that moved there were the families who really needed the housing and were briefed in certain regulations that the Housing Authority set down for occupants.

Q: You mentioned that the NAACP movement was organized throughout the community and I was curious as to whether or not this was indicative of cohesiveness in the black community and also some support from white residents in the area.

A: Oh, yes, at this time, well, the membership first was started, strictly only black people first started this organization and I'm happy to say that I'm one of the charter members of it. In fact, I served as president for six years in the Portland-Middletown Branch and I went on to become chairman of New England Regional which took in the areas from Maine down to Connecticut. That was before the Connecticut State Conference branched off into their own conference. It was first called New England Regional Conference. But here in town, in Middletown, we had very good cooperation from the white residents here, especially Wesleyan University, because we had many members of the NAACP that was working at Wesleyan as professors and teachers. In fact, we had a few that served on various committees such as the Housing Committee, Employment Committee and different committees that was a good working condition because, as I understand now, if I can remember, the membership jumped from about fifty, that we had to get in order to get the charter, to around four hundred-fifty. And out of the four hundred fifty, I would

say about two hundred-fifty were white people and about two hundred were black people and, well, this was the only organization that was really working towards the advancement of black people at that time, except for it was at the time they had a State Commission. At the time it was called Interracial Commission and I think Mr. Frank Simpson, at the time, was the head of it. It later became the Connecticut Civil Rights Commission and now it's the Connecticut Human Relations Commission, but at this time it was the State Interracial Commission. They were working along with us on many of the problems we had. But I want to state again that Wesleyan University was very instrumental in helping us to solve many of our problems because many of the people that were working there, seeing the problems in Middletown, and did work right along with the townspeople in order to clear up these problems here in town.

Q: The problems the black community had in Middletown, were they similar to problems you had left in New York?

A: New York City was such a large place and at the time I was living in mostly--it was a mixed area, blacks, Jewish and Italian in the East New York area of Brooklyn and even though we had problems there, it didn't seem as though it was as bad as here because the problems here was exaggerated because it was a small town and there just wasn't any housing for black people at that time. If you wasn't a native here and didn't own your own house, it was tough for you to get a place to stay. This was a typical New England reaction to outsiders coming in, and this was in the early 40's, the late 40's and part of the 50's. And the housing situation was really bad and the newcomers to Middletown, and with many newcomers here, black people came with the great influx here from the South, mostly from the State of South Carolina, around the areas of (Pampaco), (Florence), (Tibbetsville), and that area. Many people came here, from that area here, large families. And when they finally settled here they sent back and got some of the other relatives and they came here. So Middletown, there was a great influx of black people at that time that did come into Middletown, and this is one of the reasons why I believe that we had the problems of housing. It was hard for a black person to get a loan here for to build a house or own a house. In fact, when I came here I left a family of two, my wife and two kids in Brooklyn, New York, and I worked up here four years before I was able to send down and get them and have a place for them. I think that the first place that I got for my family was in the housing project at Long River Village. I stayed there for several years but when I first come here I was staying, rooming in a rooming house down on Union Street and we were men, all men, living there and, as I understand, there was only about four rooms. And in the four rooms that we had there there was two beds to each room and two men to a bed and, at the time, we were being charged three dollars a week for a room, something like that, you know. I understand now that it was really, now you look back and you think of what happened, you have to laugh that a room for such a small amount of money a week you had to pay, but you just didn't have any place to live and so we had to bunk in with each other and share each other's accommodations. In fact, I remember that we were pooling, we were living together and so we used to pool our money together in order to buy food at that time because the work, even though they did have work in the defense factories, it was hard for a black person at that time to get a good job in the defense factory. He got a job as a maintenance man, or something in that order, but if he didn't have the experience as for a machine operator or some other

experience that he really needed, it was hard for him to get a job there.

Q: You mentioned that Wesleyan University was involved with the NAACP action that you had and I was curious as to whether or not there was a continuous community interaction afterwards that grew out of that, or was there a time which you could remember when it reversed itself? Or just some comments on that particular--

A: Well, at the present time, now, there's the corporation isn't as great now as it was in the '40's and 50's and the early part of the '60's. Of course, during that time we had a great transition as far as people in ethnic groups in Middletown. At that time there was a great influx of black people here. Later on there come a great influx of Puerto Ricans, but the Puerto Ricans didn't stay long in Middletown. They moved into Meriden and over to New Britain. But at that time there was great-- [Noise and pause on tape].

Q: In Middletown, you mentioned that employment was a great concern in the black community and I was wondering, were there other institutions who also contributed to the problem, say retail outlets, or other government agencies, or job outlets, or Wesleyan since the school was the major institution in the city at that time?

A: At that time there was a problem in the employment. I can't seem to remember too many black people being employed at Wesleyan University. I think--I don't know whether the Coopers were the first ones to get jobs up there. But I know that now, I don't know if there are too many people employed there now, but I know at the time, I can't remember if there was any employment in Wesleyan as far as black people were concerned. We had a bad problem in Middletown as far as black people being hired in the retail stores and in the banks, Post Office, the Police Department or the Fire Department. And I can remember at the time of picketing certain stores in Middletown, Main Street, some of the Kresge stores in Middletown that was picketed at the time here. I don't want to--I shouldn't mention any names, but along Middletown Main Street if you were to go into the stores in Middletown Main Street at that time, you did not see a black face there. And, well, maybe I was a little bit of a rebel at that time because I see myself on the picket line, me picketing these stores, picketing every one of these stores until they got some black representation in there; but they were getting our money so I figured they should give us some employment. So the NAACP was behind that also. A lot of the history in Middletown you'll see it being interwoven with what the NAACP did at that time. And at that time the Connecticut Civil Rights Commission, they did a tremendous job here in town. That was one of the reasons why that I found myself on the Police Force. There was no black people on the Police Force, no black people in the Fire Department, no black people in the Post Office and, like I said before, no black people in the banks or anywheres around in the main stem. And when the application came up for Police Department I put my application in and I was selected, and I got on the Police Force here. That was quite a few years ago. I'm not going to mention how long it is now. You probably know how old I am! [Chuckle]. But I've been on now about twenty-eight years in the Police Department. But we did have a labor problem. We had, in the time of a recession and the time just before the World War and, really, after the Second World War, we had that little recession there and black people had to get employment. That's

one of the reasons why we were out there in the picket line, working for that condition. But I think that if I can recall back, there was a certain group that came up here from Florida called "Florida Hoboes" and it was a traveling baseball team. And I think these Florida Hoboes that came to Middletown was one of the best ambassadors, black ambassadors, I believe, that it was good for the town of Middletown because it began to have whites and blacks to mingle with each other and understand each other. And I remember the Florida Hoboes came up here and they got stranded in Middletown and many of them got jobs at Wilcox & Crittenden, as laborers in Wilcox & Crittenden. They were working at that time in the galvanizing division on the () and these fellows finally got housing here and they stayed in Middletown. Two men in particular, and if some of the older Middletown residents would hear these names they would recognize them: a fellow by the name of Fletcher, he used to play first base for the Middletown Giants. And this was an integrated team at that time; the blacks and whites were playing together. And another fellow by the name of Baker, we nicknamed him "Home Run Baker", and I believe that if there were at that time, if the color line had been broken in major league baseball, this was a little before Jackie Robinson's time, that Baker would have been one of the greatest major baseball players in this New England region because Baker could hit a ball; he could run, and there was nobody was gonna steal second base while Baker was the catcher. And he hit one of the longest balls that I have ever seen a man hit in Middletown, over the flag pole at the City Field, I think it's the Pat Kidney Field now; but that's the longest ball I've ever seen any man hit. And he was really carloads of Middletown citizens, white, black, all together used to follow the Middletown Giants to the various cities like Essex and Old Saybrook, Portland and all the cities around in this area that had teams. When the Middletown Giants were playing, there were carloads that would follow them to the different games and it was really a very enjoying experience to see, you know, the people in this area getting along so good together. And I think that the Florida Hoboes, who later on they began to play on the Middletown Giants Baseball Team, was one of the best, or some of the best, black ambassadors to this area because they seemed to break down a whole lot of discrimination that was existing at that time.

Q: Were there any community outlets for black youngsters during this time ()?

A: Well, there wasn't too much opportunities for black youngsters; there wasn't too much opportunities for white youngsters because it was a small town. But black youngsters were, they were accepted to schools at that time there--two high schools, Middletown High and Wilson High. In fact, two of my sons went to Wilson High and they excelled in football and also in basketball and in track, and there were a couple of other young blacks that really made a name for himself in Wilson and then after they came out of Wilson. If you can remember, if you're reading about a book that was published by (Horatio Straufus), he was a black author that graduated from Woodrow Wilson. Now at the time when Horatio--before Horatio graduated he was very prominent in track. In fact, they called him the "one-man team" because he carried Wilson. In one of the track meets he won medals in about three or four events and Horatio later on wrote a book on the underground railway, underground railroad, I think, and the book was published. And he is no longer with us now. I think that he met with an unfortunate accident. I think he was drowned a few years ago. But Horatio was one of the products of Wilson High School

and we didn't have all of this racial conflict in the schools that we have at the present time. Of course, this may be an overflow from the late '60's and the turbulent times we had then. But at that time if a black kid went to school they would accept him and his abilities were accepted, but Middletown didn't offer too much. I think quite a few of our youngsters that did graduate from high school left town to go to college or to go other places where they could get decent employment.

Q: When the black students (entered) Wesleyan University's campus, the numbers began to increase. Did this make any difference in relationships with the black community and the Wesleyan community or its image, or whatever? Did that promote any type of community interaction that wasn't there before because it was simply a black community dealing with a white institution?

A: Yes, Wesleyan went all out in order to get black students to come here to study and I imagine many grants were given black students to come to Wesleyan and to pursue their educational desires here. And they had the organization called Upward Bound and other organizations that went into the towns and to the town schools and attracted many young blacks to come in, and there was a sort of "Cap and Gown" relationship here between Wesleyan and the town and with the Wesleyan blacks and the town blacks. There was a good relationship then that really did evolve after a while. As I said before, now there is not as much, even though we do have an Upward Bound. We have certain other groups at Wesleyan that are working towards good community relations but it seemed as though at that time it was more prevalent, maybe because it wasn't fashionable then to have blacks to go to Wesleyan. That was a new thing at that time.

Q: Wesleyan's image in the black community, has this image been formed by a general trend, or was it based on specific types of interactions that have occurred?

A: Wesleyan had a very, very good image with the black community and also with the Middletown people because of the various programs that they did go into, and it seemed as though you would feel at ease in the Wesleyan University, and they even opened up many of their offices and classrooms to different meeting (halls) we used to have. Once all other groups wasn't the same. I can remember an incident with the Connecticut Valley Hospital. As I mentioned before that we had a great influx of blacks from South Carolina and from Florida. I remember the incident where they had some female psychiatric aides. They came here from Florida and they settled here in Middletown and had employment at the Connecticut Valley Hospital, and they had housed these women over top of a ward, and where they had the white psychiatric aides they were being housed in the nurses' home and, of course, here was another job for the organizations to begin working on. And we had several meetings and it was resolved. But now they can live anywhere they want on the campus; I mean of the State Hospital Grounds, after we had several meetings there. And the small things like this crop up once in a while. You remember these things, and this was back in the 40's and 50's, because it wasn't fashionable for black people to have jobs and just enjoy all the accommodations that white people had in this area. But things have progressed quite a bit since that time. One of the things I didn't mention was the influence of the various black churches on this community. The black churches had a very decided impact on the area, especially Cross Street A.M.E. Zion Church. Now, Cross Street A.M.E. Zion Church was the mother

churches, mother church, rather, of all the black churches in the area. Something that many of us didn't realize: that this church was a very old church, the second oldest church in this area here, New England Regional, as far as the black church is concerned. In 1829 the Cross Street A.M.E. Zion Church was on the campus of Wesleyan and later on they transferred the structure to Cross Street, at its present site where it is now. But out of Cross Street A.M.E. Zion Church came the Zion Baptist Church, the Pentecostal Church on East Main Street, Shiloh Baptist Church, one of the largest churches in Middletown, on Butternut Street. All of these churches came out of Cross Street A.M.E. Zion Church. And during this time many of the affairs of the community were carried, was centered, around the churches. And many of the young people at the time, most of their activities were centered mostly around the churches, going on different church programs, having choral groups, giving programs at different churches and at different town halls. And out of these churches came young people that went forth and went out of Middletown into other areas to get jobs, go to colleges, and different places. Now there was a great feeling of camaraderie in Middletown at that time, especially when they were building Zion Baptist Church. I can remember the men of Zion Baptist Church contributing their time, two or three days a week, and their labor and their skills. And we had a man that was the head of the organization that would tell us just where to lay the bricks and where to place the planks, where to put the shingles on the roof; and these men gathered together and contributed their time in order to put up this church. And you know if you've seen Zion Baptist Church it's a beautiful church. And not only the men of the church but the black men in that area, they contributed their time in order to help get this church built; and I thought it was a very, very wonderful thing. I can mention another incident during that time when a black businessman was put out of his place of business on Ferry Street and the men got together then, the men in the area. Material was bought, there was somebody at the head of the whole building, the construction situation, and he would tell us or guide us what we had to do, and we dug the foundation, poured the foundation, laid the brick and put this man up in business of his own. And this business was put up on Sumner Street in the area within the black area at that time. But a lot of this stuff has been lost now, you know; there's not the closeness now here like it used to be a few years ago. When I say a few years ago I'm talking back in the '50's now, the early 50's. Even in the early 50's there was only one black officer on the Police Force and for more than ten years there was still only one black officer on the Force. But that wasn't going against Middletown; that was in the surrounding areas the same way. In New Haven they only had a very few black officers on the Force. Now, of course, we haven't got as many which I'd like to see on the Force, black officers or minority groups. They've got three black officers and one Puerto Rican. We have one black woman acting now as our dispatcher here at headquarters but the climate hasn't changed very, very much here in Middletown. We have a young chief, Chief Eugene Rame, who is open for change. He's a man that has looked over the situation and he has seen that there should be a change here in Middletown and that we're going along with the times. And even a month or so ago he advertised in the Press, in the Courant and over WCNX, and over the Wesleyan station, WESU, for minority group candidates to come in and put their application in and try to become members of the Police Force. We have blacks now in the Post Office. We have blacks now, did have one or two blacks, in the Fire Department. Stores now hire blacks. They're in the banks, in the offices, and

Middletown is really progressing quite a bit; and I know I've painted a very sort of dull sort of very dim, dismal picture of Middletown, but I can't help that. I'm only relating history as it seemed to me at the time and as a black person how I was affected by it, you know, and what I thought about Middletown the time when I first come here. Of course, we're going to have problems with housing; we're going to have problems with housing for a long time. Middletown, the same as any other town, has growing pains but now if a black person or any minority group, if they have the money to buy a house, I can't see any bars at all that would keep this person from going forth and purchasing a house if they want to. Middletown right now, not like when I first went to buy my home, at that time a black person going to the bank and asking for more than \$3,000.00, they'd think he was crazy! But now we have black people in Middletown buying homes in the \$40,000.00's, up in that area, higher. So, Middletown has progressed quite a bit and I have a very good feeling about the future of Middletown because I think our city has now come to grips with our problems; and we have the "City Fathers" that have come to grips with various problems and I think that in the future, we have a very rosy future for Middletown. Even though I painted a dismal past, we have a very rosy future for Middletown. We have young people coming up that are going to college and understanding the situation. They're going into different businesses of their own and also into different administrations, some going into politics. We have a few blacks that are holding positions in our city government at the present time. In fact, Councilman McRae, at the present time, is doing a very fine job on the Council; and we have Miss Barbara Davidson who has served several terms on the Board of Education. So, we have blacks that's really grab a-hold of the situation and they are going forward, and we have some blacks that have been head of other public offices; and we did have Reverend Davage as one of the first blacks that did hold public office here in Middletown. He was connected with Welfare, I do believe, at that time. Of course, he has expired now, but he did a very good job there. So, Middletown is really progressing and I'm looking forward to a very rosy future in the City of Middletown with all different nationalities and ethnic groups working together.

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