

**The Project in Interpreting the Texas Past
Dr. Martha Norkunas, Project Director**

**African American Texans
Oral History Project**

Lightly Edited Transcript

Interviewee: Dr. John Q. Taylor King, Sr.

Interviewer: Thu Suong Thi Nguyen

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Transcriber: Thu Suong Thi Nguyen

TN: Today is February 25th, 2004, 10 o'clock in the morning. I'm here with Dr. John Q. Taylor King

JK: Senior

TN: Senior (both chuckle). Could we start off by you telling me about your background?

JK: Okay. Well, of course, as has been said, I am John Q. Taylor Senior, Ph.D. and I'm also a retired lieutenant general in the Texas State Guard. I'll talk about that a little bit later. I was born in Memphis, Tennessee September 25th 1921. That tells you my age. I'm not ashamed of age, I'm proud of it. My mother was Alice, her maiden name was Alice Clinton Woodson, W-O-O-D-S-O-N. She was born in Memphis, Tennessee in 1891 and I can give you the date if you need it, 1891. My dad was John Quill Taylor, Senior, M.D., medical doctor. He was born in Clifton, Texas and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas. He was born in Clifton, Texas July 21st 1884 and of course, Mother was born in Memphis as I said, April the 18th 1891. My dad's father was born in Eldereigha, Arkansas and my dad's mother was born in Brenham, Texas. My dad's father was German, born in the United States, but his parents came from Germany, so he was German. My dad's mother was I'd say three-fourths Cherokee Indian and she had some Black blood in her,

Negro blood, African American blood, whatever you want to call it, and a mixture of other kinds. She was born in Brenham, Texas.

I have not been able to determine where they met or where they were married. I have looked and searched and searched and looked and I just haven't been able to find it. But they were married and my grandfather was a teamster. He worked for the Santa Fe Railroad Freight Company and that's how he happened to be in Clifton, Texas in 1884 when my dad was born. I have been to Clifton. I've been to the county in which Clifton is located and they have information that was interesting to me. In January of 1884, my dad's mother bought two lots from the Santa Fe Railroad. It was interesting because as I read history, during that era, married women were not permitted to buy property in their own name. However, she bought these two lots from Santa Fe Railroad in her own name and that was in January 1884.

TN: Do you know how she managed to do that?

JK: I have no idea. All I know is the record indicates that the property was listed in her name. The property was sold in December 1884 in Clifton, Texas and it was sold by my grandmother and grandfather and that (laughs) too was interesting. I was trying to bridge the time of my dad's birth because they were not issuing birth certificates then. All his records indicate he was born July 21st 1884. If she bought this property in January 1884 and sold it in December 1884, that sort of substantiates the fact that they were in Clifton when my dad was born in July. The Santa Fe Railroad Freight Company moved my grandfather to Pine Bluff, Arkansas and he was there for a while and a second son was born to that couple in Pine Bluff. Then the Santa Fe Railroad Freight Company moved him to Cincinnati, Ohio and for some reason, he did not like Cincinnati as a place to raise children. He left the Santa Fe Railroad Freight Company and moved to Little Rock, Arkansas and he and my grandmother opened a corner grocery store. That's where my father's two sisters were born. The younger girl died when she was small, but the older girl lived to maturity. So my grandmother and grandfather opened this corner grocery store, on High Street, H-I-G-H, 11th and High. There are a lot of interesting stories they tell about this corner grocery store. We didn't have the big supermarkets then to try to push them out of business. The corner grocer was a sort of a fixture in the community. Well, my dad finished high school in Little Rock and went to Alabama Normal School which was a college in Alabama from which he graduated and went to Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee.

TN: Is this where your two sons went as well?

JK: Yes, right. He graduated from Meharry in the class of 1911 and did his internship and moved to Memphis, Tennessee. That's where he met my mother. Now mother was born, as I said, in Memphis, Tennessee, April the 18th 1891. She did her elementary and high school work there in Memphis, some of it in public schools and some at Lemoyne College because Lemoyne had an elementary school and high school, well there's college courses.

She finished high school in Memphis and went to Howard University in Washington D.C. for one year. The reason she went to Howard, one of my grandfather's sisters and her husband lived in Washington and her husband was a trustee at Howard and they wanted my mother to come there. Mother didn't particularly like Washington and I think it was more or less living with her uncle and aunt that she didn't cherish so much. So, she left Howard after her freshman year and went to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee for her next three years. She graduated from Fisk in 1912.

Now, the interesting thing about my mother going to Fisk, my grandmother was in the first class of Fisk the day it opened in January 1866. She was living in Memphis, she was a member of the Congregational Church as were her parents and the Congregational Church through the American Missionary Society, opened many, many schools and, let me put a peg and ask you this, are you familiar with the Amistad case?

TN: No.

JK: The Amistad case involved some Africans who were stolen off the coast of Africa, put on a ship, and called Tecora, and were taken to Cuba. They landed in Havana. They were bathed and oiled and put on the sale block. They were purchased by two Cuban plantation owners, Ruiz and Mendez, and they were put on a ship called the Amistad. Amistad in Spanish is "friendship" as well as in Portuguese. This was a Portuguese friendship ship. They were going to sail around the island to the other side where the plantations, these two men Ruiz and Montez owned.

Usually they were put in the hold of the ship at night, but locked in chains. During the day, they would bring them up on board, take off the chains from their hands and from their feet and given an opportunity to walk around and let the blood circulate and get some air. Well, one of the captives was a prince of the Mende African tribe, that's where they were from. They were stolen from Sierra Leone. They were not from Sierra Leone, but they were marched from their home country to Sierra Leone. That's where they were captured and put on the Tecora. He was the prince of the Mende and he found a loose nail on the deck of the ship, kept the nail and, that night, using the nail, was able to get the chains on

his ankles and the chains on his arms loose. How he did it, only the good Lord knows, but he got them loose. He was able to help three or four other captives get themselves loose.

The next morning when they were taken up to for their daily walk, they jumped on the captain and the crew and they killed the captain and most of the crew, but they spared the lives of Ruiz and Mendez because they promised to take them back to Africa. These African captives did not know anything about seamanship. They couldn't read a compass, they knew nothing about the ship itself, except, at night, they knew the North Star, and they knew the way to Africa by the North Star. So, the ship went east by night, but by day when there was no North Star out, they went north. They went more north by day than east by night. Weeks later, months later probably, they ended on Long Island shore. They were captured by an American ship, they were put in jail, they were charged with mutiny and murder, and they were sentenced to be hanged.

A rich merchant in New York City, who was a member of the Congregational Church, read about this and became incensed in what was happening to these Africans. Although he did not approve and condone the killing of people, he knew why they did it and he knew they should not have been captured and taken away from their home. He formed a committee of church people, mostly Congregationalist and they called the committee the Amistad Committee. They hired a lawyer. In the meantime, the court appointed lawyer for these men and that's when they were found guilty and sentenced to be hanged for mutiny and murder. He hired a young lawyer who did a lot of research and found that the other trial was operated fraudulently. He went into court, he lost the lower court decisions, but he finally got it to the Supreme Court. He needed someone to plead their cause. John Quincy Adams had been the President of the United States. He and the committee were able to get John Quincy Adams to come out of retirement and plead the case of these African captives in the Supreme Court. He won their freedom and the court forced the government to send them back to their home in Africa.

This committee called the Amistad Committee decided that its work was not over. This was in 1839 to 1841. I'd like for you to check these dates to be sure that they're right. You can find this in the encyclopedia, in a lot of places. They thought that their next assignment was to help captives, I call them captives instead of slaves, help the captives, or the slaves, escape from the South into the far northeast or over into Canada. They were abolitionists, see? They did a very good job of it. They still maintained the name the Amistad Committee for a while. Then they decided to change their name to the American Missionary Association. They did a very good job with the help of the abolitionists who were in the New England states, particularly in Massachusetts. Of course, when

the Civil War, that people mistakenly call the War between States, I call it the Civil War because that's what it was, when the Civil War was over, they decided that their next big job was to open schools and colleges to educate the freed slaves and those Blacks, Negroes, African Americans, whatever you want to call them, who were free but had no education. They founded over five hundred schools and colleges all across the South. As local governments were willing to accept some responsibility for continuing the education of Blacks, they would either sell the schools to the local community at a ridiculously low price or give it to them. Of the more than five hundred schools and colleges that they founded, there are only six left. The first one they founded was Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee and Fisk, of course, is still very much alive. Talladeega College in Talladeega, Alabama, Lemoyne College, which is now Lemoyne hyphen Owens College, Memphis, Tennessee, but it was founded as Lemoyne College, Toogaloo College in Toogaloo, Mississippi. How many does that give me? Five?

TN: Four.

JK: Four? Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana and it was not founded as Dillard it was another name and I'll think of that name in a minute. Then Tillotson College in Austin, Texas now Huston-Tillotson College. Those are the six remaining AMA, as they call it, American Missionary Association Colleges of the more than five hundred they started. All six of these institutions now maintain a very close relationship to that church. It was the Congregational Church. It's now the United Church of Christ. You have to be very careful when you say that and be sure and put United because there's a congregation called the Church of Christ, but this is the United Church of Christ which is the continuation of the Congregational Church after a series of mergers with other church denominations. Now, that gave you the background of Fisk.

Fisk was founded in 1866 and with my grandmother living in Memphis, and her father, I didn't tell you about her father, but my grandmother's father was an Englishman, was born in England, came to this country and her mother was a mulatto from a slave plantation in Shelbyville, Tennessee. My grandmother's father's name was John A. Allan, the Englishman's name was John A. Allen. For the life of me I cannot remember my grandmother's mother's name, but I'll have to find that. Although she was from a slave plantation, he took her to a church and they were married in a church. They had several children, but my grandmother was the only one who lived. She lived to maturity. She lived to get grown. The Congregational Church there, in Memphis, received information about Fisk being founded so at the day that it was to open, they took my grandmother to Nashville and registered her at Fisk. It wasn't called Fisk University, it was called the Fisk School. It was named after Union General Clinton B. Fisk. He was a Union General in the Civil War and he was a member

of this American Missionary Association and he was one of the founders of Fisk. Well, Grandmother was there in 1871 when the Fisk Jubilee Singers were organized. Have you heard the Fisk Jubilee Singers?

TN: I have not.

JK: Fisk Jubilee Singers were a group of students at Fisk, young women and young men, with wonderful voices who were taught by a man in the beginning music department at Fisk, to sing. Fisk had had difficulty getting money to continue. So, he organized the Fisk Jubilee Singers and went from state to state to state giving concerts, raising money to save this school that was about to collapse. They went to England and had a performance before Queen Elizabeth, the Queen of England. They did a mammoth job of raising money and there is a beautiful dormitory on the current Fisk campus. Fisk was not located then where it is now. But there's a beautiful dormitory on the Fisk campus, built years ago, called Jubilee Hall. It's a women's dormitory. My mother lived in Jubilee Hall when she was a student at Fisk, my wife lived in Jubilee Hall when she was a student at Fisk, my daughter lived in Jubilee Hall when she was a student at Fisk.

Okay, so that was 1871. Grandmother completed her work in 1872, went back to Memphis. She married a man by the name of Henry L.C. Kennedy, K-E-N-N-E-D-Y. They had a daughter and a son and two sets of twins back to back. Unfortunately, both sets of twins died but the daughter and the son grew to maturity. The daughter's name was Emma and the son's name was Henry. They both went to college and Aunt Emma became a teacher. She married a Congregational minister named William Johnson and moved to Lexington, Kentucky where he pastored a Congregational Church.

They had four sons. William was the oldest. William went to Fisk then went to Howard University Dental School. Let me show you how foolish he was. He was three months from graduation from the dental school. He had become an expert guitar player, banjo player. Louis Armstrong came to Washington for a concert and his guitarist became acutely ill. Someone told him about this dental student at Howard who played great guitar and he (chuckles) sorry, he conned him, Bill Johnson as we call him, to leave Howard and come and play with the Louis Armstrong band. He never got back to finish his dentistry. He was a musician the rest of his life. Great musician but, could have been a better dentist. Aunt Emma wanted him to be a dentist because her brother was a dentist. Uncle Henry, let me finish the boys first and I'll come back to Henry.

Next was Clarence Johnson. Clarence went to Hampton Institute, that was the college. Aunt Emma did the forgivable thing. She was planning her sons lives.

William was going to be the dentist, Clarence was going to be the dental technician, so she sent him to Hampton to study dental technology. He was going to make the teeth. He graduated from Hampton, couldn't get a job as a dental technician, went to New York and finally became a motorman on the 8th Avenue Independent Railway System in New York. All that background in dentistry, became a motorman. Of course, he lived a good life. He married, had a family and he was comfortable.

The next son was Frank Johnson. She sent Frank to Morehouse College in Atlanta. She programmed him to be the teacher. When he graduated, he became a teacher and he taught the rest of his life. The youngest son was Henry Johnson. She wanted Henry to be a minister. He said, "Mother, I'm not going to be a minister. I'm not going to be a minister." Henry went to Hampton and studied Industrial Arts, became an industrial arts teacher and a wonderful cabinetmaker. See that piano stool? He made that.

TN: It's beautiful.

JK: That's handmade. Became a wonderful, wonderful man, what did I call him? Cabinetmaker, wonderful cabinet maker. Well, Bill never got married. I take it back. Bill got married, his wife died, he had no children. Clarence got married and had several children. Frank never got married. Henry got married and had three children and only the oldest girl lived. The other two kids died. He married a young lady by the name of Cordelia Nelson.

TN: And this was Henry?

JK: Henry, Cordelia Nelson whose uncle, at one time was president of Dillard University. She's the one who had the children. The only child who lived was Carol and Carol is still living. Carol is a retired teacher. When she retired, she was an administrator in the Baltimore school system. Okay, that's Aunt Emma. Go back to Uncle Henry now. You can work this around logically, see. Henry went to Lemoyne, and graduated and went to Meharry Dental School. He graduated from Meharry Dental School in 1905, went back to Memphis and set up his practice. He married a lady from New Orleans.
(minute 31:15)