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Alexandria Legacies
Oral History Program



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Abstract: Howard Bontz was born in 1922 and moved to Virginia in 1969. In this second interview, he talks briefly about his family tree with lineage to a Bailey's Crossroads innkeeper. He details his work life in Chicago, his army experience, his training with tabulating machines (working for Remington Rand, for example), and his career as a data processing operator (with Computer Systems Command). He explains how this training and experience with computers brought him to Virginia.

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Family Tree	
Howard Bontz:	[Tape starts in middle of conversation. Howard is looking at his family tree documents.] Going back to 1797. My great-great-great grandfather was an inn keeper and he was in Bailey's Crossroads. Somewhere in here, his first wife passed away. So, then he married Sarah Collin. You've heard of Collin...Collin family?
J.H.:	No. Who are they?
Howard Bontz:	She's my great-great grandmother. They then had John Bontz. John Bontz married Elisabeth Hill. From that marriage they had eight children, as far as we know...as far as I know, let's put it that way. They come across here like that.
J.H.:	Wow!
Howard Bontz:	My grandfather Fairfax.
J.H.:	[Looking at documents.] Fairfax. Yes.
Howard Bontz:	[unintelligible]
J.H.:	[What] is his first name?
Howard Bontz:	[unintelligible] Now, he had a son; in fact, he had three sons — Howard, George, Charles, [and] Thelma. Howard A. is my father...This has been a tremendous journey, because as you can see here, her name is Dorothy Canavaugh. She died in April of '05. I am now married to Dorothy McKenna. She was married for fifty-two years and her husband had been... chief of personnel in the Air Force.
J.H.:	Wow!
Howard Bontz:	Civilian personnel. But, I am Army... Now, somewhere in this line, someone there, a woman in the Bontz family, married Samuel Adam and he was a doctor, became a pediatrician, and my cousin here... Margaret Elisabeth, she goes by the name Elisabeth. She and I tried to get some of this information together. But this Dr. Samuel Adams was her pediatrician. And, what struck a note in her head was she remembered him telling her mother that that's a cousin: the Dr. Samuel Adams is a cousin! He—tied it all in. However, we don't know which one it is.
J.H.:	So ...we don't know who?
Howard Bontz:	Now, it goes further... to the wife of general... I'm getting old. Ah, gee! That's awful. I've got it written down. Anyway, the wife of the general, she's my cousin. She's a descendant of this Dr. Samuel Adams. Anyway— The general retired about the same time I retired from the army. He retired four stars, chief of staff of the European forces for the army. But before that, he was the Superintendent for

	the United States Military Academy at West Point. And, he and his wife were there, and their daughter Holly. And, Holly apparently was of age, she met a first lieutenant there. And...she's my cousin now; she married the First Lieutenant David Petraeus.
J.H.:	How do you spell it?
Howard Bontz:	P-E-T-R-A-E-U-S. He was the commanding general in the V.A. He is now the commander of South Command. He's down in Tampa. He flipped the coin at the Super Ball game, if you saw that.
J.H.:	Um-huh. So your cousin is married to him.
Howard Bontz:	So, he is the tail end of our family tree...
Army Experience	
Howard Bontz:	They come here, because back in 1942, I was drafted. They had a physical exam, and the doctor was behind me, he was saying something. I am deaf. I can't hear. I couldn't hear him. And [laughs] 'draft dodger,' and in the Army I went! There was a staging area in Illinois, just south of Rockford, Illinois. Then, from there by train to McClellan, Alabama. I had basic training there. And then, I came up to Fort Washington. We had two carloads of potential data processors. Punch cards. So, we attended class at Fort Washington. And, the funny thing there was, you get in the chow line, and lo and behold not only did you have generals in line too, but you had files of POW on the back.
J.H.:	Really?
Howard Bontz:	In case you didn't know, Fort Hunt, the actual Fort Hunt, was a prisoner... a top secret prisoner of war camp.
J.H.:	Wow!
Howard Bontz:	Nobody knew about it! Even those people who lived there, didn't know. But you probably have heard that, haven't you?
J.H.:	I think I have.
Howard Bontz:	It's a top secret place. They had mostly navy people, and they interrogated them. How they did it and all that, I don't know.
J.H.:	Which navy?
Howard Bontz:	But they were looking for secrets of the U-boat.
J.H.:	Oh, okay, right!
Howard Bontz:	That was that part of it. But anyway when I finished up training, at Fort Washington, I got shipped to Columbus, Ohio, the Fifth Service Command, and I was put on the code desk, because I was a beginner on actual equipment, punch card equipment. Well, then they gave a test, 'Army Specialized Training Program,' A-S-T-P. And, people that graduated at a certain level, they were qualified; they'd go to free college with various courses and I qualified to go to Purdue. I picked Purdue, it's close to Chicago, I can get to Chicago, okay! But before that happened, I got orders, they cut orders, they

	needed people down in Orlando. So they shipped me to what is known as 83 rd MIU, 18 th SCU, AAFSAT, OAB, Orlando, Florida. That's the Eighty Third Machine Record Unit, Eighteenth Statistical Control Unit, Army Air Forces School of Applied Tactics, Orlando Airbase, Orlando, Florida. You with me?
J.H.:	[Laughs] I'm going to have to write that down.
Howard Bontz:	That's the way the Army does. But I was there doing my job. I was working on equipment there and to start with because the other fellows had more experience operating the punch card equipment. I was given the job of key punching and operating a...what is it...
J.H.:	Keyboard?
Howard Bontz:	Teletype! I'd do that to the extent that I used to sit with a general... Anyway, I used to sit in this filming room, and he had film taken from the wings of planes in dog fights. He was a tactical officer for the Air force. He was trying to figure out solutions to some of the problems we were having. And, I used to sit there; my stomach would start [mumbles]—
J.H.:	[Laughs] ...because you were watching...
Howard Bontz:	Anyway, that's what happened. And then, the general turned to me and he says: "I got it." He says: "See if we've got such and such. Signal early warning battalion; we can use that and also if we've got a squadron of P47 or P38." So then I'd go back and I'd go through the files and find out what we had. A squadron of P38s, which was—you remember that plane?
J.H.:	I don't remember, no!
Howard Bontz:	It's a twin engine. Twin engine planes could go either way, equally fast. Single engine plane could go this way pretty fast, but this way very slow. And [makes a shooting sound]— they're getting shot _ out of the air over Japan, in the Pacific. So, he said: "Hey, we send P38s to the Pacific Theater, we can lick the Japs." He says: "Where are they? Where's the P38s?" Well, I went [unintelligible]. The message was received by H. H. Arnold.
J.H.:	Who's that?
Howard Bontz:	The one at the keyboard, at one o' clock in the morning. So, anyway, we got a reply back, by late morning, that the P38s were on board a ship somewhere between South America and Africa. Like they were going to divert the whole—
J.H.:	Squadron?
Howard Bontz:	Take about half of them and put them back through the Panama Canal and send them to the Pacific. And after they got there, it took a couple of weeks, the tide of battle swung in our favor, because the Jap's Zero is not a good match to the 38. I've got a book on the Jap Zero, if you want all the specifications on the [unintelligible].

	<p>Anyway, what happened, this general that I was working with, he said he wanted me to go to OCS.</p>
J.H.:	<p>What's that? What is OCS? What does OCS stand for?</p>
Howard Bontz:	<p>Officer Candidates School. Oh, you're not familiar with it? Oh, shame on you!</p>
J.H.:	<p>[Laughs]</p>
Howard Bontz:	<p>So, anyway, he passed a word to the commander of the 18th SCU (Statistical Control Unit) and the commander bumped it to the Deputy Commander and he called me in his office, and he said: "They want to send you to OCS." And it's at Harvard University. He says: "I'm particularly interested in it because I'm interested in statistics and analysis and so forth." His name is Robert McNamara. He was the deputy commander. So, anyway, he said: "What you have to do, you have to pass the physical." Okay. I tell I'm general service. And I was examined and checked and thumped and picked and everything under the sun. And they said: "You can't hear, can you?" I said: "That's right, I can't." He said: "What are you doing in service?" I says, "I don't know, I'm general service." He says: "We're going to reclassify you to limited service." So, about a week later, I appeared before this board and the colonel who was the chief of the board, he was the doctor that examined me.</p> <p>And, he says: "Definitely, we've determined that you are deaf." He says: "Reclassify me from general service to limited service. And as such we cannot send you to OCS." So, he says: "You're reclassified to limited service." A week later, Congress did away with limited service. I got a call to appear before the board again—so it's the third time I appeared before them—and reported to the general— (it was the colonel) He said: "Boy, you're getting picked around!" I said: "You bet I have been." And, he says: "Would you like to get out of service?" I said: "I am sacked? I can't hear you. I have to read your lips." And then he said to me: "Would you like to get out of service?" And I said: "Yeah!" I said: "I can get out. I want out!" So that was it. I got out of service. I came back to Chicago. I'm from Chicago. And, that's my story up to that point, anyway.</p>
<p>Training and Working in Chicago</p>	
Howard Bontz:	<p>But then I got a job where was it— I went to work with International Harvester McCormick Works [unintelligible] operating tabulating equipment on the 8 PM-8 AM shift. There were twenty thousand people in the plant, manufacturing, or assembling torpedoes right on the banks of Chicago River and they'd ship it down the Chicago River to New Orleans. They had to ship it to the Mississippi and then down. And, I was there for, oh, several months. I read about some outfit that was paying expenses for some bright young man.</p>

J.H.:	You! [Laughs]
Howard Bontz:	<p>To learn cost accounting at the Central Y College in downtown Chicago and I ran for that. It was only about two, three months and I got out of that and earned a credit in that and I got a job with A.B. Dick. Have you ever heard of them? They had copiers, now, but at that time, they had a sheet about like this with ink on it and you typed on it then you could put that sheet on a machine and crank out copies.</p> <p>And they're not in business anymore. That's part of my story. [unintelligible]. My first job, I ever worked out after I went one year to college, was W.C. Ricci and Company. Paper box factory. They got bought out, they don't exist, W. C. Ricci. From W. C. Ricci, I was drafted into the army and I went into the army air forces: the army air force doesn't exist anymore. Well, after I came out, I went to work for International Harvester, the torpedo factory. Anyway, it doesn't exist. Now it's a big, big beautiful ball field. From there I went to college, the YMCA college—they don't exist anymore; they went out of business. But now I went to A.B. Dick. They couldn't sell those duplicating [machines] anymore, so they went out of business. But, I got a job at Allied Tire and Battery Company, on the Southside of Chicago, and I got a job. I was the head book-keeper.</p>
J.H.:	Cool!
Howard Bontz:	Well, it was a pretty boring job. But I did meet Richard J. Daley—
J.H.:	Who is that?
Howard Bontz:	—Mayor of Chicago for years, years, and more years! He was a crook, but he was an honest one.
J.H.:	[Laughs]
Howard Bontz:	That's how I got acquainted with him, because he parked his car in the garage I had to go open the door, so he could get in, because I'd be working late. And we'd sit and talk, stand and talk really. He lived a block away. He'd walk home from the garage. Well, what happened, I got tired of where I was, I wanted more money, couldn't get it, so I applied in the newspaper there was an ad: if I'd go out to Rochelle, Illinois, there was a company there that needed an assistant controller for the company. It wasn't a company, it was twelve companies.
J.H.:	Wow!
Howard Bontz:	<p>So I applied. Then, after an interview they hired me. I started working for them. Pretty soon I smell a rat here. We had Tilton Cameron—Tilton this and Tilton that— was all kinds of names [unintelligible]. All these different companies!</p> <p>And, they had made a nice set of books here, nice set of books under</p>

	<p>the table. I got caught at this and how sad. I didn't like it at all, but what really set me off was that they were building a hundred and twenty homes at a time. Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang! Up in Wisconsin. Now, we were in Rochelle, Illinois and I wasn't too far from Wisconsin. Rockford. That's just north of Rochelle. And, anyway, they were building— I can't recall the name of the area, but they were building a set of homes and it was right out of, near a sandy beach. A storm came up and blew the sand against the first paint job on the display home. They had a hundred and nineteen more to do. But they had that one up and painted; the one next door, they had the foundation in, poured, and that's as far as they had gotten. The other one they had a hole dug and then from then on it's just sandy beach. So, here, they had this damage of sand blowing on the first paint. The boss told me to call in the insurance company. I called the insurance company and they sent a man out. I introduced him to the boss and vice versa. The two of them hopped in the car, drove up there, came back the next day. The next day, the boss came in to me and he says: "I want a five thousand dollar check made out to—"and he gave me the name of this insurance man. I says: "You're getting pretty low in the book balance here." He says: "That's all right." So, okay, I wrote out the check, he signed it. After awhile [mimics laughter], "Good to meet you," and all this, then he left. That smelled [fishy], you know? He says: "Oh, by the way—" and he reaches in his pocket, handed me a check for a lot: for a hundred and twenty homes, I think it was two thousand dollars a piece. That's right, two thousand dollars for each one.[laughs]</p>
J.H.:	Wow! One-hundred and twenty times two thousand!
Howard Bontz:	And, he says: "Put it in our back account." He says: "Don't worry about covering that check!" So, then I got to think about how the guy operated. He had the biggest sailboat in the Lake Michigan, in the harbor of Chicago. The biggest one! But in the winter time, he couldn't leave it out in the water, so he started a lumber yard—
J.H.:	Near the water?
Howard Bontz:	<p>No, it was in the lumber yard. But then that's the cost of doing business for the lumber company.</p> <p>Meanwhile, I says: "I gotta get out of here!" I looked around; I found a job with the G. Lumber & Coal Company back in Chicago. Well, at G. Lumber, they wanted somebody to customize their records there. And both the records, what did I say— sales, a record of what they had in stock, the payroll. I was working on that for quite a while! But as part of the job, I ordered Cardex cabinets. Are you familiar with them?</p>
J.H.:	Unh-uh.

Howard Bontz:	They had little slides that'd come out and they'd hold the cards, and you could read them. I set up the whole system. But it was Cardex System by Remington Rand.
J.H.:	Cardex? Is that right?
Howard Bontz:	Cardex, yeah! What happened then, Remington Rand sent a salesman and tabulating equipment. He came out and I gave him an argument why it wouldn't work the tabulating in this company. And he says: "You know something about punch cards!" And I said: "Yeah." He says: "Would you like to come to work for Remington?" So, I went to work for Remington and I was his assistant. He was the salesman, I was his technician. And we revised company after company, after company! Globe Oil Company. They wanted a 'keep fill system.' Do you know what that is? -With fuel oil? They keep track of how much oil is in these customers' tanks.
J.H.:	Okay.
Howard Bontz:	And then they had an idea of the 'degree days.' A degree day is the difference between the mean average temperature which is sixty-five degrees and the temperature for the day. See! So they knew how cold it was. From that figure you kept adding that up and with that figure you could figure out on day number seventy- nine you gotta deliver oil to here, here, and here. So then you'd send the truck. Automatic keep fills.
J.H.:	Okay.
Howard Bontz:	I worked out a system. The machine that I had to work with multiplied, didn't divide. So I had to figure out a way of multiplying and not dividing. I can't remember how I did it, but I did it. Well, that company you probably heard of them...Exxon. They grew and grew— I should have quit while I was ahead. So, from there, I was in savings and loans, I tried out teller office of savings and loans, but it had an immediate record that they can take to the tab department, print out the person's...how much money he owes, what he has in the bank. They do it now by computer. You know you've seen it. That was prior to computers. So, anyway, while I was still working with Remington, they bought out Univac, and low and behold I wound up at [unintelligible] Technology. [Side 1 ends; side 2 begins] I worked with the data processing management association, up in— what's the name? Clinton—The woman—
J.H.:	Hillary?
Howard Bontz:	She's [unintelligible]. Hillary, yeah! She lived about two blocks away from where I was working and living that time. And anyway that's where I was for a while at BTMA. And what happened much

	<p>to my sorrow, to the association: they have an annual meeting and at this meeting they vote for a new president. They put a new president in. He was all IBM and I was Remington Rand. That didn't go well - down with Howard.</p>
<p>J.H.:</p>	<p>[Laughs]</p>
<p>Howard Bontz:</p>	<p>So from there I was out of a job and I'm reading the want ads. And there was a blind ad, so I responded to it. About ten days later, I got a letter inviting me to come in for an interview at the Fifth United States Army. I went down there, had an interview, he says: "You finally fit perfectly. Your knowledge is just what we need."</p> <p>And one of the things I had worked when I was working with Smitty. He was a sad, hopeless man I worked at the Joliet Arsenal. They put new supervisors in there and they crashed. They didn't know what the heck they were doing! Put me up there, got the whole thing rolling again, and the controller of the Joliet Arsenal—he announced at a meeting that I was going to take over data processing. I said: "Nothing doing!" They were quite upset. Anyway, I went on—he gave me references.</p> <p>So I got the job with Fifth Army. I worked in the policies and procedures office and I helped to set up data processing within the Fifth United States Army. I've got a letter to prove it! I can prove it! And, that was great! I was there for about four years; and low and behold I got an order down from the Pentagon saying they [are] combining Fourth and Fifth Army. "Do you want to go with the Fourth Army, we have a job for you, but that's in Texas." I was just freshly married, my wife says: "No, no! I won't go to Texas." I said: "I don't want to go to Texas, either!" So, I started looking around for a transfer within civil service. But it seems that one of the trips that I made when I was with Fifth Army was out to Fort Carson. The chief was—forgetting all these names—he used to be here on Eisenhower Avenue. It's the headquarters, supply headquarters. He came out; we were looking at National Cash Register proposal on taking care of inventory. Well, then I go to— [Brief pause to close door to television room.]</p>
<p>Moving to Virginia</p>	
<p>J.H.:</p>	<p>So that supply place?</p>
<p>Howard Bontz:</p>	<p>So, anyway, I evaluated this National Cash Register. I wrote a nice long report that led to my commander. He forwarded it to the commanding general of the Fifth Army. And there were a couple of other people from Computer Systems Command there, at Fort Belvoir. So, when it came time for the Fifth Army to merge with Fourth Army, I got an invitation to come down here to Belvoir and</p>

	see the Colonel here. I filled in the application form with requirement and I went to see him. And I walked into his office and he said: “[unintelligible] from 52.” Something like that. He said: “Have you got it?” I says: “Yeah!” I handed it to him. And he calls his assistant. He says process this: “We’re hiring him!” I was hired.
J.H.:	And you came here?
Howard Bontz:	So, then he says: “Well, we’ve got places here for computer analyst, systems analyst, computer programmer and then we have a supply man here: that’s gonna be you!” I said: “Sir, I am not a supply man.” He says: “You were at that meeting on that supply, you wrote a report on it.” I says, “Yes, but that’s because I had experience in supply, in addition to having the training in data processing and computers.” And he says: “You mean to tell me you know data processing and you know supply?” I said: “Yes.” He says: “Oh, thank God!” So, he did away with that requirement for that position [and] converted it to a computer systems analyst. That was fine. He did away with it here in his office. But that application had gone to the Pentagon. And it was to fill a 334-job as a supply man. And I’m a 343! I’m not a supply man. I’m a data processing man. Well, I waited. I came back here to Chicago and I waited for my transfer. I waited. I called up. Nobody could figure out what was happening. Finally, one guy, after about six months, he decides to go to the Pentagon and find out what happened to it. Well, he found it. It was at the bottom of a stack and the girl there, a personnel girl, she didn’t know what to do with it, because the numbers didn’t jibe. She was sitting on it. Well, I tell you, you could have heard these messages going back and forth. Boom, boom, boom! I got orders to pack up and come. You know? So we had to sell the house.
J.H.:	[Laughs]
Howard Bontz:	So, I transferred and I came here to Computer Assistance Command. And I get here and reported for work. He says: “Oh, we got you here!” It was a sergeant major. He says: “You’re going with me up to Fort Dix. We’re gonna make a presentation there and then we’ll go on from there.” Okay. So, we went up to Fort Dix. We drove up there! Ain’t too far! And, anyway he made the presentation. I can’t hear. I don’t know what he said. So, anyway, I got the impression of what he did, you know. He sat down with me and we wrote out everything—oh, I don’t know how thick, it was a book about like that. Step, by step, by step. What the people up there had to do to convert the supply records. Well, the supply records out of Fort Dix are minimal at that time. And it’s very easy to do it. So anyway we came back, we drove back. We got back here to Belvoir and that was on Friday night. Monday morning I came in to work and here is the sergeant

	cleaning up his desk of everything. And I says: “What are you doing?” He says: “I’m retiring!” And I say: “Wait a minute! Who’s going with me on these briefings?” “Nobody.” So, for the next three years, I went out on my own and I briefed all these different commanding generals, data processing managers, and supply managers — twenty three installations in the United States!
J.H.:	Wow!
Howard Bontz:	What they’re going to do. How they’re going to do it. I started out from scratch. I didn’t know what was happening. So, I finally retired. After fifteen years there and five years in Fifth Army; and they threw a luncheon for me. And I said “Oh, God! I’ve gotta make a talk, you know.”
J.H.:	[Laughs] Right!
Howard Bontz:	What I say? I know just the thing. So I got up there and I said: “This is going to be quite a blow to you.” And I said: “My first job was with W. C. Ricci & Co. They do not exist anymore. From there I went into the Army Air force. They don’t exist anymore. From there I went with International Harvester McCormick Works. It’s a football field now. Every single one gone! Every one! And here I am, I’m leaving Fort Belvoir, retiring, and I says: “Just draw your own conclusions about Computer Systems Command here.” Everybody thought that was funny! [Laughs] This was in August of ‘84. December 1, 1984, orders from Pentagon: “Computer Systems Command is hereby disestablished; they are now combining with Communications Command.”
Howard Bontz:	[unintelligible]...want me to come and work with you? But that’s the story of my life!
J.H.:	That’s great!
Marriage with Dorothy	
Howard Bontz:	But, while I was in Chicago, I was getting lonesome. [I] put an ad in the paper and I met a bargain. Had a wonderful dog. And we hit it off pretty good and we got married. We got married in—1968—No!
J.H.:	Fifty-eight?
Howard Bontz:	I guess it was Sixty-eight?
J.H.:	It wasn’t ’58? No?
Howard Bontz:	Sixty-eight it was. So, I worked for Fifth Army at the time. And we came here, transferred in 1970, January 1970. She died April 2005. Her name is Dorothy. And then I was over at Paul Spring Retirement Home. That’s where we were. But she died in a nursing home...Anyway, Mount Vernon Nursing home. And, I was living at Paul Spring. There was a vacant apartment next to me. And the way I got introduced to her was funny. I had a scooter, one for my wife and one for me. Then my wife died. Her daughter heard that I had

	two scooters...She came over and I said: "Oh, no! You don't want to buy that!" She slammed the door on the way out. I'd turned her down. She wanted to buy the scooter. I didn't get a chance to tell her that she could get one for free through Medicare.
J.H.:	[Laughs]
Howard Bontz:	But she could [have a] loan. I loaned it to her until she got the other. She married me so she could keep it! When we got better acquainted we played scrabble all the time.
J.H.:	Cool! Good game.
Howard Bontz:	Yeah! I was very interested and she was very nice; she is very nice. And, one day I was out in my kitchen. Her kitchen [was] back to back. I tried to open...Bang, bang, bang— Do you recognize "Bang-to-the-bang, bang..." [Dorothy joins in the conversation, then leaves.] She's got the scooter now. So that's the story.
J.H.:	Thank you! This is fantastic! [Howard discusses recommended contact.] [End]