City of Alexandria

Office of Historic Alexandria

Alexandria Legacies

Oral History Program

Project Name: *Alexandria Legacies*

Title: *Interview with Charles "Buster" K. Williams:*

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Location of Interview: *Alexandria, VA*

Interviewer: *Mitch Weinschenk*

Transcriber: *Unknown*

Abstract: Charles K. "Buster" Williams: was born in Alexandria in 1908 and has lived here all his life. He attended elementary school at St. Josephs and Parker Gray, and then went to high school in Washington D.C. because there were no secondary schools in the city for African Americans at that time. Some of the jobs that he talks about are hauling ice on an ice cart, working at the Boot Black barber shop, being truck driver and delivery person for Virginia Public Service, working at the White House, and "barnstorming" as a semi-pro baseball player. He has fond memories of growing up in a small city as a child.

Table of Contents/Index

Minute	Counter	Page	Topic
Not indicated	*Not indicated*	3	Background
		5	Earliest Memories
		6	Education
		7	Work Experience
		8	Family Life
		10	Community Life
		11	The 1920's
		11	The Depression
		13	The 1940's and World War II
		15	After World War II
		17	The 1950's
		18	The 1960's
		22	The 1970's
		22	The 1980's and 1990's
		23	Best Memories
		24	The Future and the New Millennium
		25	Questions from Buster Williams

Background	
Mitch Weinschenk:	[Tape begins in middle of sentence]... history program. This is an interview with Buster Williams on February 5, 1999 conducted by Mitch Weinschenk, intern. Can you please tell me your full name?
Charles "Buster" K. Williams:	My name is Charles K. Williams:
M.W.:	And how old are you sir?
Buster Williams:	I'm 90 years old now.
M.W.:	And what was your birth date?
Buster Williams:	Birthdate was October 10, 1908.
M.W.:	And where you were born?
Buster Williams:	Born in Alexandria, Virginia, N. Columbus Street, 900 block of N. Columbus Street.
M.W.:	And what were your parents' names?
Buster Williams:	My father was John, Mother was Louise, Louise Williams, John and Louise Williams.
M.W.:	And her maiden name was?
Buster Williams:	Her maiden name was Mason, Louise Mason.
M.W.:	And was (sic) their families from this area too?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	Did you have any brothers or sisters?
Buster Williams:	Yes, two sisters.
M.W.:	And their names were?
Buster Williams:	Isabel, Isabel Williams and Alice Williams.
M.W.:	Did they live in the area too?
Buster Williams:	Yes, we all lived together. We grew up together, in a family.
M.W.:	Is this area here?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	How about your wife?
Buster Williams:	I was married and divorced.
M.W.:	When was that?
Buster Williams:	I was married in [19]44 and divorced in [19]49.
M.W.:	Did you have any children?
Buster Williams:	No children.
M.W.:	No children. How long have you lived in the City of Alexandria?
Buster Williams:	I have lived in the City of Alexandria all my life. I've gone on trips and also lived in Annapolis, Maryland, New York, and Washington, D.C. for a short period of time. But Alexandria has always been my home. Always maintained my Alexandria residence.
M.W.:	In your living in Alexandria, did you live in different locations in

	the city?
Buster Williams:	Yes, I've lived on Washington Street, 700 block N. Washington, my grandmother's home. And my father's home was 930 N. Columbus Street in Alexandria, Virginia. And Madison Street. We moved about because conditions grew better. We took advantage of the better conditions and moved in better housing.
M.W.:	So how long did you live with your grandmother? Do you recall?
Buster Williams:	I lived with Grandma from 1917 to '27. She died in '27. I stayed with her on Washington Street. My grandmother wasn't originally from here. She came here from Manassas, Virginia. My grandfather worked for Portner Brewery. Portner was originally a brewing company in Manassas, Virginia and they moved the plant here in Alexandria and brought them with him. My grandfather and grandmother were slaves. They came out of slavery with Portner, Portner Brewery, which was on N. Washington Street. Had a mansion in the 600 block on N. Washington Street. They had a house for them in the 700 block. I lived there and stayed with her until she died in '27, '28.
M.W.:	What happened to that house? Do you know?
Buster Williams:	The house was sold. The house was ... it was six or seven children, my grandmother's children, my aunts and uncles. And when she died, my uncle came and sold the house while we were living in it. Sold the house over our heads.
M.W.:	How did that make you feel?
Buster Williams:	I didn't have any feeling because we weren't paying any rent. He only got a thousand dollars to divide among seven people. The house sold for, so he said, sold for a thousand dollars.
M.W.:	In 1927?
Buster Williams:	Yes, in '27, '28.
M.W.:	'28. Okay. And then you went and moved where?
Buster Williams:	I moved on Madison Street. I rented a house from Charles Blunt. 801 Madison Street. Later on, I bought the house for $4400 with a down payment of 10%, which was 400 and some dollars. I bought that house until…we stayed there until the Housing Authority came along and took over.
M.W.:	And what year was that?
Buster Williams:	That was '44. 1944. And we had enough money out of that place to make a payment, down payment on this house, which at that time sold for $14, 995.
M.W.:	So you have been at this address since 1944?
Buster Williams:	Since [19]52.
M.W.:	Oh, '52. And why did they come and take the house in 1952?
Buster Williams:	To build projects. The projects are there today. Built project for the

	low income families.
M.W.:	Do you think they gave you fair money for the house?
Buster Williams:	No. We fought them because they came along and set their price. It was an organization that the city had going around buying up the property and the city would take over. They would build the houses and somehow or other it would revert back to the city after forty years, the houses and the grounds. So it wasn't a city project. It was redevelopment, redevelopers. I went to court for years fighting because they only offered $5000 and I owed $1700 on the property. So I fought and they eventually compromised. I asked, not knowing any better, I asked for ten thousand, and they compromised for $7500, which was half. When I asked for $5000 more, they gave me two thousand five hundred.
M.W.:	To settle?
Buster Williams:	Yes, it was settled like that.
M.W.:	How did they - were there other people in the community [inaudible] were they up in arms too?
Buster Williams:	Just one person was up in arms. The rest of them was (sic) satisfied because they had men on this side going around telling people, "You can't fight City Hall." And the people were ignorant to the fact [inaudible] they had explained to us that it wasn't city, it was the developers buying up the property and giving what you would accept. And that's the reason I held out and got the amount of money I did.
Earliest Memories	
M.W.:	As far as when you were living in these different locations, in your earlier years, can you tell me what did you do as far as a child for entertainment?
Buster Williams:	Entertainment - we played marbles, spin tops. We played baseball because there was plenty of open spaces. We could build a baseball diamond any place. We played marbles in the street. Played spin tops in the street. And could play baseball. There wasn't (sic) houses; there was open lots for blocks and blocks. No houses whatever. And at that time, Alexandria was only about a mile long. Alexandria start[ed] at Second Street and end[ed] at Hunting Creek. And there was (sic) about 6000 people in Alexandria.
M.W.:	And this is what period of time now are we talking about? What year are we talking about now?
Buster Williams:	We're talking about 1915, 1916, 1920.
M.W.:	I assume those activities you were talking about were during the summertime. What about entertainment during the wintertime?
Buster Williams:	During the winter, we went to school, stayed in. There was (sic) theaters. We went to theaters. Go to theater. 10, 12 cent, 15 cent.

	Stay as long as you want. And, we also went to Washington [D.C.]. There was transportation to Washington. They had what we called "penny museums." They had museums that you could operate machines, see pictures. Hot dog was only a nickel. Five cent hot dogs from one end of D Street to the other. There was hot dog stands one right next door to the other. Get your hot dogs, and your chili, mustard, and onions for a nickel. And there were penny museums. You take a dollar's worth of pennies and stay all day looking at the machines.
Education	
M.W.:	Where did you go to school, as far as elementary school?
Buster Williams:	I went to Parker Gray School. Parker Gray at that time was an elementary school. We didn't have a high school here for blacks. I went to Parker Gray. I went to Catholic school, St. Joseph's first. I went to St. Joseph's and I attended school and church at St. Joe's. Later on I became a Catholic. I joined the church. But the priest at that time was Father Kelly. He said the tuition would be twenty-five cents a week. If you didn't have twenty-five cents, to come to school anyway. So I went to school there. We didn't go any higher than third grade. We divided the rooms off with blackboards, three rooms. Third grade I went, I finished the third grade at that and went to Parker Gray Elementary School to the sixth. I finished the sixth grade there and went to Washington to a junior high school at 10th and V Street, 10th and U.
M.W.:	So there was (sic) no junior high schools in the City of Alexandria?
Buster Williams:	No junior high schools.
M.W.:	Or high schools?
Buster Williams:	Or high schools. You could... we got algebra here in the sixth grade. You could go from here with the mathematics into first grade high school in Washington. But you had to give a District address. We had relatives in Washington; we stayed with them. I went to Garnet-Patterson, which was a junior high school at night.
M.W.:	Did you work during the daytime?
Buster Williams:	No. Just went at night. I worked.
M.W.:	What did you do at that time as far as working?
Buster Williams:	Well, in the summer I worked [the] ice wagon. We had ice carts, and mules pulling ice carts. I worked the ice wagon, two dollars a day. You didn't work by the hour; you worked by your route. You finished your route, you was off. You go to work seven o'clock; you had to go on your route seven o'clock. When you covered it and served all your customers, you was (sic) finished.
M.W.:	So you did that in the daytime and then you went to school at night?

Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	So you had a busy day?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	As far as the environment in the schools at that time, were the students respectful of the teachers?
Buster Williams:	Yes, had to be. They made you respect them because they would fight you.
M.W.:	They would fight you?
Buster Williams:	And tell you, "Bring your parents"; send you home and tell you, "Bring your parents." That they would beat them, too. Yes, those teachers really got respect and they received respect -- from the students and the parents.
Work Experience	
M.W.:	After you finished school, what was your next job that you had, like a full time job? After you were out of school?
Buster Williams:	My next full time job was [at] "Boot Black." I came out of school and I went to work in a barbershop -- Boot Black.
M.W.:	Where was that located?
Buster Williams:	King Street.
M.W.:	The address? Do you remember the address?
Buster Williams:	Ten hundred block. Jack Winston. I worked for Jack Winston. There were two barbershops there. Reverend Ross was across the street from Winston and I worked both shops. Go from one to the other. And also delivered. Around the corner was a cleaners. I worked for him for $2.50 a week. Cleaners, delivering clothes. He cleaned and pressed them; I delivered them. After school and during Saturdays. And after I quit school I went to work for Jack Winston, boot black. And I worked there for two or three years.
M.W.:	And they gave basically all your haircut services, barbershop type services?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	People would come in there?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	Give them a shave?
Buster Williams:	Shave and haircut.
M.W.:	Right. And how much did you make doing that, do you remember?
Buster Williams:	Well, whatever. I bought the material and whatever I earned was mine. I did real good.
M.W.:	Did you?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	So you did that for two and a half years?
Buster Williams:	Then I went to work for the electric company. At that time it was the Virginia Public Service Company. I went to work for them in

	1927, delivering refrigerators, radios, and ranges, electric ranges. I worked for them for ten years, from 1927 to 1938.
M.W.:	And did you basically work in the Alexandria area or was it the whole metropolitan area here?
Buster Williams:	Whole Northern Virginia.
M.W.:	Northern Virginia.
Buster Williams:	Sterling, Virginia.
M.W.:	You went all the way out to Sterling, Virginia?
Buster Williams:	Went all the way to Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.
M.W.:	Is that right?
Buster Williams:	Yes. Charlottesville, Virginia.
M.W.:	So those particular days must have been very long days then if you drove all that distance?
Buster Williams:	Yes, it was long days. Long nights and days. It was the Virginia Public Service Company -- they controlled all of Northern Virginia. And we delivered not only ranges, we delivered material too, to different places.
M.W.:	As far as construction sites, do you mean?
Buster Williams:	Yes. We didn't do construction, but we delivered the material. [inaudible] material. Cross arms and different things, [inaudible]
M.W.:	Okay. What kind of trucks did they use back then?
Buster Williams:	At that time we had a Ford truck, model...We had a Model T. We start with Model T; we went to Model A. We had the first Model A truck in Alexandria in 1928. Ford Model A.
Family Life	
M.W.:	I want to get back a little bit to your family life as far as living. There was (sic) how many of you living in the house together at one time? Your father, mother?
Buster Williams:	Father, mother, and two sisters. Five of us. Four room house.
M.W.:	How would you consider your family life? I mean, were you a close family?
Buster Williams:	Yes, we were close-knitted. Yes, we were a close family.
M.W.:	You looked out for each other?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	I guess you must have looked out for your sisters especially, right?
Buster Williams:	My big sisters looked out for me.
M.W.:	Oh, they did. Okay. So, you used to listen to radio a lot? Read newspapers?
Buster Williams:	Mostly magazines. Magazines and catalogues.
M.W.:	So they would deliver the catalogues to your home then, right?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	Mail order catalogues?
Buster Williams:	Yes, mail order, in particular Montgomery Ward's, Sears and

	Roebuck's, and this catalogue from Chicago we used to get quite often. At that time Sears and Roebuck's was in Chicago. I don't remember if it was Marshall [Fields] or who it was. Was another... Fields, yes, Fields, Marshall Fields.
M.W.:	How about as far as the family chores were concerned? Did everybody pitch in? Or did each one have a specific thing that you had to do?
Buster Williams:	We had to pitch in for the simple reason that there wasn't such a thing as running water, running toilets. We had what you called a "slop bucket" that you did your business in [at] nighttime. Everybody had tubs, not tubs, but cans that the city would give you. And they had outhouses. The can was in the outhouse. The man would come around once a month and empty them.
M.W.:	Only once a month?
Buster Williams:	Once a month. It was a 25- or 30- gallon can. And you didn't have water, you had to go to the pump and get [inaudible]. There were pumps on the corners. You'd go and pump your water and bring it. Wash water. Most people had a barrel. And they caught the water off the houses. On wash day we would use that water. If it wasn't enough, we'd have to bring water from the pump which was on both the corners. There wasn't (sic) any electric lights. All the houses, those that could afford, had gas lights. And there were no street electric lights. They had gas lights. They had a lamplighter who used to go along every night and light the lights, and come back in the morning and put them out. Called him the "lamplighter."
M.W.:	Did you, your mother, did you grow a lot of vegetables yourself in the garden?
Buster Williams:	We didn't grow anything. We had neighbors. We were in a mixed neighborhood. There was a man on the corner, Petit, and in the middle block, was a Eberhard[??], and they had gardens. My mother used to give my two or three cents to go get two or three cents worth of potatoes, or onions, or whatever she needed. There were stores that sold molasses -- Lou Ellen's[??] Black Molasses. I don't know if you ever heard about that or not. You'd go to the store and get two or three cents worth of molasses. She'd open the petcock and run so much in your jar. You guess at it. No measurement. And then you could get, we had kerosene lights in the home. Lampshades, kerosene lights. You clean them. You could get two or three cents worth of kerosene.
M.W.:	That would be enough for the whole house?
Buster Williams:	Yes, that would be enough for the whole house.
	Did you get a smell from that? From the kerosene burning?
Buster Williams:	No, you had lamps.
M.W.:	Well, I'm saying, "Did it make a smell in the house?"

Buster Williams:	It would smell, but not enough to bother you. It wouldn't bother you. Yes, it would make, if you turned it up too high, it would smoke. You turned it where it should be, it would just light. It wouldn't make any smoke. Or no odor, any odor.
Community Life	
M.W.:	As far as the community that you lived in, was it a close-knit community?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	You were saying that you bought vegetables from your neighbors.
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	Were there other activities that the neighborhood did together as a group?
Buster Williams:	No, everybody...There were fishermen. And there were car knockers. Ask what I mean -- car knockers. Men used to take cars apart, such as Fruit Growers Express. They were up at Potomac Yard. You could go up there and get any amount of lumber you wanted. People built fences, repaired the homes. Was free lumber. And ice. All the ice that came off. They used to fill refrigerated cars. It would be on the platform. If the ice got away from the men up on the platform, it would slip off, and you could go up and help yourself to the ice on the ground. You didn't have to worry about ice, refrigeration, or anything like that because there was no refrigeration. There wasn't (sic) any electric refrigerators.
M.W.:	So, I imagine that you felt that the streets and everything at night in your neighborhood were safe to walk around?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	There wasn't any crime?
Buster Williams:	We stayed in the street. In the warm weather, we didn't go in the house. We stayed in the street. We stayed in the fields. Nobody bothered. Walk the street any hours of the night. Nobody bothered.
M.W.:	You mentioned before that you went into D.C. for entertainment.
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	What about people…were there people coming from D.C. that came into Alexandria?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	There was? What did they come into Alexandria for that they couldn't find...?
Buster Williams:	We had carnivals. Open field shows. Had carnivals and circus. Wasn't anything in the city D.C., but on the outskirts, in Maryland. Not in Maryland, but the District has a lot of vacant lots too. Out Benning Road and [inaudible]. There was (sic) all vacant lots. They had Barnum and Bailey's, Ringling Brothers, and all those shows used to come out in the open fields out on Benning Road. We had

	"101 Ranches[??]", [inaudible], carnivals, western shows, and minstrels. We had plenty of entertainment.
The 1920's	
M.W.:	I am going to shift over to the 1920's now. Can you tell me some of your memories of the 1920's? As far as, were there like nightclubs in Alexandria?
Buster Williams:	No, no such thing as nightclubs. There were speakeasies. No such thing as nightclubs. They had speakeasies and after-hour places. Of course it was during prohibition. The river was lit up there for excursion boats, tug boats. And everything on the go in the 1920's. There was a place down the river where the boats used to go two or three times a day. [inaudible] used to go to Marshall Hall. We used to go to Riverview. They'd run excursions ten o'clock in the morning, two o'clock in the day, and six o'clock at night.
M.W.:	And how long did those excursions last? Was it...?
Buster Williams:	If you wanted to go at ten o'clock you could stay as long as you want, until the last boat came back about ten o'clock at night.
M.W.:	How far did they go in that period of time? How...?
Buster Williams:	It wasn't too far; must have been about five miles. It wasn't too far. You couldn't see it from here, but in Mount Vernon you could look right over picnic ground. Then we had picnic spaces here too. Down Fort Hunt Road. And Braddock Road had picnic grounds. We used to go on picnics, excursions - train excursions to Manassas, Woodstock, and different places. The Elks and different lodges would do an excursion. We had plenty of entertainment. There was a dance every night, every week. We had a dance every week, especially Thursday night. We had plenty of entertainment.
M.W.:	But there was no alcohol then?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
The Depression	
M.W.:	Go the depression. How did that impact your family?
Buster Williams:	Terrible.
M.W.:	Were they hard hit by it?
Buster Williams:	Yes. Not too much. Because we didn't, never did live, you know, luxuriously. I don't know. My father, him, and his friends, they all raised hogs. I don't know if you know where the Giant [Supermarket] is, or not. That used to be a lot of pigpens. Everybody had their own independent pigpen, but they were all built together. It wasn't one. You know, just separate, individual pigpens. Everybody take care of their own hogs. We'd buy a barrel of flour, a barrel of meal. And you'd have your hog meat. Salt it down. Last all summer, and all winter. You had your flour, and you had your lard. You made your own lard. That was during the

	depression.
M.W.:	So it may have been hard times but you had enough food to eat?
Buster Williams:	We had plenty to eat. And at that time, women sewed. If you knocked a hole in your pants, they would save them. You wear out a pair of trousers, wear out a shirt, they would keep that shirt. And, when a hole came in your pants, they'd put a patch in it. And we'd wear them. Wash them and wear them. Wouldn't be ashamed to wear them anyplace. That was the time when patches went with the time of life.
M.W.:	Explain, if you can, how people's spirits were? What did they do to keep themselves in good spirits when times were tough like that? Did they turn to certain things?
Buster Williams:	No. We actually didn't know what tough times were because the rent was cheap. I remember my father buying a home, house and lot, a four room house and lot, for $250. Your rent was $5, $2.50 a week, a month, $5 a month. A whole house didn't cost you too much. The rent wasn't high. And your water bill was about fifty cent, $2.50 a month. From fifty cents to two-fifty. All depends upon how much spigots you have.
M.W.:	As far as the depression was concerned, did you think it would last a long time, or were you confident that it would be over and good times would come again?
Buster Williams:	Well, we actually didn't know what a depression was. We didn't know what it was. There were dumps; there were dumps all over town. The packing houses...you had grocery store, wholesale groceries. Had bakeries, your pies. They would throw them away and the children would get the pies and cakes. And even turkeys. See you didn't have refrigeration. Your poultry wouldn't keep. They had to throw it away. And people would get it. All the folks know what to do with it. They take a little baking soda, or whatever. Wash it up and cook it. It was no hard time. Hams. I seen my grandmother take a ham, had skippers in it. Take and wash the skippers off and eat the ham.
M.W.:	And it was okay?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	So, nobody blamed -- you don't think anybody blamed like Herbert Hoover, for instance, for the Depression? What do you think about Herbert Hoover?
Buster Williams:	Oh, no. He was a terrible man. Worst thing he said, "Labor man wasn't worth more than a dollar a day." That's the only thing I remember I had against him. A dollar a day!
M.W.:	So you are saying he was against the common man?
Buster Williams:	Yes.

M.W.:	You think so.
Buster Williams:	Yes, he cared nothing about the common man. Wasn't worth anything.
M.W.:	Then came Roosevelt.
Buster Williams:	He was a good "Joe." He was a Joe.
M.W.:	You think he saved the country as far as that's exactly what the country needed?
Buster Williams:	Yes, that was exactly what the country needed when they put him in there. And he declared a holiday. Took the gold off the market. That was a tough time. Took the gold off the market. Banks closed. I was working in [19]29. I always wanted to have something. This salesman had come along selling the stock to the company that I worked for. His name was Miles. I'll never forget his name. "You can't lose. It isn't on the stock market. This stock will never go bad." So, when the market bust in 1929, I had maybe four or five hundred dollars in stock.
M.W.:	What company was this?
Buster Williams:	Virginia Public Service.
M.W.:	Okay.
Buster Williams:	Electric Company. I couldn't get the money. Couldn't get the money. I'd been a young man, I want what I could get. So, what I did get was an electric range. I got an electric range. I got a radio. There's the cabinet right in there. And a coffee urn, and tray, a set, a coffee set. And, no electricity in the house! All electric appliances...
M.W.:	With no electricity?
Buster Williams:	That was in [19]29 and I didn't get electricity until '31. When I did get electricity, hooked it up, and we had [inaudible]. That's the cabinet. I keep it for an ornament. 1929.
The 1940's and WWII	
M.W.:	Moving to the 1940's and World War II, as far as listening to the reports in the newspapers and to the radio, did you listen, did you think the United States was going to get involved in World War II, or did you think we would never get involved in it -- before Pearl Harbor happened?
Buster Williams:	Before Pearl Harbor...
M.W.:	What was the feeling?
Buster Williams:	I had thought that Hitler would rule the world.
M.W.:	You did?
Buster Williams:	Yes, I was working. I was working on the "map service."[??] United States didn't have anything. Didn't have guns. Had guns from World War I. They had helmets from World War I. They would capture the Germans. And they didn't have field jackets. They had old Eisenhower field jackets.

M.W.:	[inaudible]
Buster Williams:	They captured the Germans. They captured the helmets. They captured the jackets, and the guns. And, Hitler would have won the war had not he turned back on Russia. He'd have, he'd have beat the world.
M.W.:	You think so?
Buster Williams:	I was scared to death. I used to dream about it at night. He'd be bummin'; I'd be duckin' all night long. Because I was draft age. I was draft age. And I had registered. Yes, I had registered. I had registered in [19]42 or '43. And I went to work on the map service[??]. To stay out the army, I transferred to the powder factory at Indian Head, Maryland. We made powder for cannons. They made powder for some other guns. Missiles. Everybody worked at the powder factory was exempt. And that's the reason I went there. I didn't want to go in the army.
M.W.:	So you stayed stateside the whole time during the war?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
	I know that earlier you were talking very highly about Roosevelt. Did you feel that he was a good president and the right president to get us to win the war?
Buster Williams:	Yes. Best winner. Best president in my time.
M.W.:	Did you have any family or any friends that actually went over and fought in the war?
Buster Williams:	Yes, I had friends that went over, but all of them would never discuss the war. I never heard any of they discuss anything that happened. They never talked about it. And I often wondered why. Right today, I have friends that were in it and never hear them mention it.
M.W.:	Now you are talking about all black men now?
Buster Williams:	Yes. All black.
M.W.:	Well, thank God that they all came back. That was one good thing.
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	How was the community affected during the war as far as rationing was concerned and things like that? Was it tough in Alexandria here?
Buster Williams:	Yes, it was tough to an extent. But there was always -- they gave stamps. You could always purchase stamps. People that wouldn't eat, they'd get the stamps, they needed them. But instead of going and getting the food, they'd sell the stamps, or give them away. It was the wrong thing to do, but people had to survive.
M.W.:	Now, as far as the address you were living at during the war, what was the address you were living at here in Alexandria during the war?

Buster Williams:	I lived at 801 Madison Street
M.W.:	Do you think the president as far as his, I know he was famous for his chats as I recall, and the newspaper reported, do you think that he kept in touch with the American public during the war?
Buster Williams:	Yes, he kept...
M.W.:	...to know what was really going on?
Buster Williams:	Yes, he let them know everything that was happening.
M.W.:	So there was a trust there?
Buster Williams:	Yes, indeed. He even exposed himself. Went out with Churchill, went everywhere. Went to [inaudible]
M.W.:	I believe so.
Buster Williams:	Yes, I think so. Yes. He exposed himself to the war. Yes, he was a good one. Roosevelt
M.W.:	Where were you when you heard that the allies had won and beat Germany? Do you remember? Were you working at that factory still at that time?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	And did they announce it to you that the war was over?
Buster Williams:	No.
M.W.:	Or, how did you find out?
Buster Williams:	I found out on radio and television. I found out in [19]45. In '45. I had to stay at Indian Head. If I left Indian Head, I would be inducted in the army. So I stayed in 'til '45. That's when I heard. 1945.
M.W.:	So that was a big relief?
Buster Williams:	Yes, it was a big relief for me.
M.W.:	For you and your family and the community at large, I would assume?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	You were happy for everybody.
Buster Williams:	Yes, indeed. It was all free.
After WWII	
M.W.:	Do you think after the war, right after the war, there was a renewed pride in America and in the local community?
Buster Williams:	A which?
M.W.:	A renewed pride? Do you think people were proud to be Americans?
Buster Williams:	Yes, yes. Everybody was proud to be American. We had won! We had won! Some of them hadn't done anything.
M.W.:	Did you want to take a little break? You look like you're a little tired.
Buster Williams:	No, I'm not tired.
M.W.:	What do you think were some of the major community and social

	changes that occurred after the war as far as peoples' relationships with each other?
Buster Williams:	Relationships was (sic) great. Right after the war, the fellows all came together. It was a circle of people that socialized. And the doors was (sic) open. The bars was (sic) open. The clubs was (sic) open. And everybody was free to go anywhere they wanted. I had gone places that I never had idea that I would go to. Especially places in Washington where heretofore Washington was worse than Virginia. What we call "Jim Crow." Black and white didn't go together. In the theaters, they had a partition. You saw the same picture, be in the same house. On one side of the wall were white, and the other side [black]...It was terrible. And then there was a place, Chinese-American restaurant on 14th Street. It used to have good shows. That was opening up. I went there. I always wanted to go there and I was afraid to go there and different places. I really enjoyed myself. Because I was what you call a "ragtime boy." You know like jazz, big bands, and all that stuff. Good singing.
M.W.:	Well, that was still pretty big, even after the war, wasn't it?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	Big bands?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	Did you see any of the big bands?
Buster Williams:	Oh, all of them.
M.W.:	Who did you see?
Buster Williams:	Duke Ellington, Tom Dorsey, Jimmy Dorsey, Guy Lombardo.
M.W.:	Where would they normally play? In the big hotels in D.C.?
Buster Williams:	Big hotels. Especially on New Year's Eve, they would all go around different places. Saw Jimmy Cagney and my old buddy...There was (sic) two brothers. Do you remember the Burr's? Noel Burr and Wallace Burr[??]
M.W.:	Oh, Wallace Burr?
Buster Williams:	Yes. He was here in Alexandria. Jimmy Cagney too.
M.W.:	Yes, I do remember?
Buster Williams:	They'd go from one hotel to another.
M.W.:	And how much did they charge you to go in to [inaudible]?
Buster Williams:	I was working. They didn't. There was no charge.
M.W.:	Oh, is that right?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	I know we have the bicentennial of the City of Alexandria is coming up. The 250th anniversary is coming up in 1999.
Buster Williams:	This year?
M.W.:	Yes. But, in 1949 they had the bicentennial of Alexandria City. Do you remember that at all?

Buster Williams:	No, I don't remember that. I was having a tough time. Was going through a divorce. I don't remember much of 1949. I was working, but I don't remember not much what happening. So for centennials and those things, I wasn't attending. I didn't have time.
M.W.:	You were busy working full time?
Buster Williams:	Yes, and getting my life together. Because my wife and I split up, and she was…I was going through a divorce at that time. I was only earning less than $60 a week, and she was asking for alimony. That was a shame. I was in the labor force.
The 1950's	
M.W.:	I am going to switch to the 1950's. Do you think the 1950's, generally speaking, times were better during the 1950's, or before the war, do you think it was better?
Buster Williams:	Things were better in 1950. Because your salary was greater. People was (sic) earning more money. Living conditions were better. Yes, 1950 was much better.
M.W.:	What was (sic) your feelings about President Truman?
Buster Williams:	I don't know. I worked at the White House during Truman's administration. They built the bomb shelter during his time at the White House. I worked there underpinning the White House to put the shelter down. So I don't know. I don't know too much. I never knew too much. I never had no idea about Truman as president. He never did nothing great I thought.
M.W.:	He came from Roosevelt who was such a great man. He could never live up to Roosevelt's expectations, right?
Buster Williams:	No, he couldn't fill his shoes. There was a gap between him and Roosevelt. Because he had nothing to do. I don't care what he did, it wouldn't be in comparison with what Roosevelt did. He was just president. Just fill out the term.
M.W.:	And what about President Eisenhower?
Buster Williams:	Eisenhower was a great man.
M.W.:	You think he used his military greatness to be a good President?
Buster Williams:	Yes, yes, because with his experience, he had seen how the segregation in the armies were. He broke that up. He put them all together. It was a great accomplishment. One of the greatest things since Abraham Lincoln. Brought the people together.
M.W.:	Did it reflect here in the City of Alexandria? Could you see people getting together under his administration, more so?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	Community relations?
Buster Williams:	Yes, it actually did more for the military than it did for the civilians. Civilians benefited from it. But clearly it was more for the military to bring them together. Put them in the same mess hall, same table;

	it was a great accomplishment.
M.W.:	I know oftentimes it is said that the 1950's were called the happy days? Do you agree with that or not?
Buster Williams:	Yes, I agree with it. Yes, the happy days.
The 1960's	
M.W.:	We're going to switch over to the 1960's. And I'm going to ask you if you consider the 1950's to be the "happy days", what would you call the 1960's? What would be your best assessment of the 1960's?
Buster Williams:	Well, the 1960's, we had an increase in wages that reflected on the poor person. It gave him more spending money, made things better for others in the house. It opened up opportunities for them to buy better homes and have better conditions much so than...Each segment of time increased the benefit of living.
M.W.:	I would imagine in the 1960's that you probably saw a lot of the old time businesses go by the wayside, because you had a lot of the bigger companies coming in, like Giant Food, for instance, would come in.
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	Was that something that you missed, all those small time businesses that you knew for all those years?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	So there was (sic) good times on one side?
Buster Williams:	Yes, all along from the beginning, the stores were pushing one another out. Years ago, when we go way back, there were stores on every corner. On this corner was a grocery store, post office, and a bakery.
M.W.:	Right here on this corner?
Buster Williams:	Right here on this corner. [inaudible] post office and everything. Stamps were two cents. You bring your packages there, weigh your packages, weigh them. And behind that was a bakery. His brother run a confectionary. As time went on, things got better and a man received better pay, and he had better conditions. [inaudible] conditions better because he could buy what he wanted. Every store, every corner in Alexandria had a store. Every corner. Two down on this corner, two down on this corner. The funny part about it, all the stores were mostly run by gentiles. Wasn't Jew stores. But they came along later. They came along later in a syndicate. The came along. They were all together. They had a chain of stores called "DGS."
M.W.:	DGS?
Buster Williams:	District Grocery Store. Those all controlled by Jews and out of that is where I think the Giant came. The Giant put them all together and had just one store --the Giant-- and then they spread out. That

	just started the war.
M.W.:	Why do you say that?
Buster Williams:	It started a war. Of course, never could touch the Safeway. And the A&P; the Safeway and the A&P were the first. And then they had the store, the Piggly Wiggly. That was the first self-service store. You get your food and gave it to the clerk. Piggly Wiggly and the... The Safeway was always a grocery store that sold meats. A&P was Atlantic Pacific Tea Company. Only thing they sold was coffee and tea. And they began to sell meats and things. So it was just a grocery war.
M.W.:	I see what you mean. I guess with all this business going on there must have been a lot more increase in traffic, right, as far as cars and congestion?
Buster Williams:	Yes, it was, but most all the traffic were (sic) trucks, delivery trucks and so forth. Other than that there wasn't (sic) too many private automobiles.
M.W.:	Even in the 1960's you're saying?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	I know that you told me earlier that you were stateside here during World Wide II and you actually didn't fight in the war. I want to move on. What are your feelings about the Vietnam War?
Buster Williams:	It should never have been fought. United States should never have gone into it. Because they didn't have anything out there. They were just trying to make peace, I guess. I don't know. I never did understand it. I still don't.
M.W.:	So it wasn't the same situation as World War II then?
Buster Williams:	No.
M.W.:	...where there was a threat, like you were saying, that Hitler would take over the world?
Buster Williams:	Yes, take over the world.
M.W.:	But there was no threat like that during Vietnam?
Buster Williams:	No, those people didn't have anything to fight with. Only thing they depend on China, Japan, Russia.
M.W.:	Since we are talking about different presidents here, I might as well bring up the next one, and that is John F. Kennedy. What did you think about him?
Buster Williams:	I thought he was a good man.
M.W.:	I mean did he continue a lot of the things that Eisenhower was doing, or did he change a lot of things?
Buster Williams:	Yes, he continued Eisenhower's policy. He continued. Although he didn't stay long enough to accomplish what he had planned to do, I think.
M.W.:	Do you think the community, Alexandria for example, really

	believed in what he was saying?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	People believed in him?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	I know, like you said, he didn't stay around long enough. Do you remember where you were when he was killed?
Buster Williams:	Dallas, Texas.
M.W.:	I am saying, "Do you remember where *you* were when you heard the news that he was killed?"
Buster Williams:	I was home.
M.W.:	You were at home.
Buster Williams:	Yes, because it was a holiday. It was a holiday. I saw it on television.
M.W.:	What did you think?
Buster Williams:	I thought it was terrible. Yes, I was home. It was a holiday. I was working at Sears and Roebuck and we had a holiday. Was it Thanksgiving Day?
M.W.:	Yes, I believe it was.
Buster Williams:	Yes, it was a holiday.
M.W.:	So it was a feeling of shock that you had?
Buster Williams:	Oh yes, it was terrible.
M.W.:	I mean that hadn't happened since Abraham Lincoln, right?
Buster Williams:	Yes, yes it was terrible. Yes, I was sitting right there.
M.W.:	I know that he was buried right here at National Cemetery. Did you get any feeling or was there any community feeling here, in Alexandria here, as far as the funeral services were concerned? Did you feel any impact of the funeral services?
Buster Williams:	No, no. Maybe in Arlington they did, but not down here.
M.W.:	Since we are talking about that period of time, as far as civil rights with Martin Luther King, did you ever get to see him speak in public?
Buster Williams:	No.
M.W.:	Did you ever have any desire to?
Buster Williams:	No.
M.W.:	You didn't?
Buster Williams:	No.
M.W.:	And why was that?
Buster Williams:	I was afraid of the mobs, the gangs. I did never like the crowds, you know, too many. It was [inaudible] here in Washington. I could easily have gone. I was off. We all had a holiday. I didn't go, no.
M.W.:	You were afraid of the crowds?
Buster Williams:	Yes, I knew, the night that he got killed I had a premonition that it was going to happen

M.W.:	Did you really?
Buster Williams:	Yes, I did. I knew it was going to happen.
M.W.:	That night?
Buster Williams:	Yes, that night, but I thought it was going to happen sometime earlier. Down in Alabama, Mississippi. I didn't think it would happen in Tennessee. I thought it would happen before that. But I remember that night very well and know exactly where I was when the news broke, that he had been shot.
M.W.:	What made you think that that was going to happen? What made you so sure that that was going to happen?
Buster Williams:	Because there was so much prejudice against him. So much prejudice. People wanted him dead. So many people wanted him dead.
M.W.:	But what about, you can look at it from the other side too and notice that he had a lot of support?
Buster Williams:	He had a lot of support and he had a lot of people that hated him. His own people hated him. Look at the woman in New York -- spit in his face.
M.W.:	Let's get back to presidents again and tell me what you thought about President Johnson. After Kennedy was assassinated, President Johnson took over.
Buster Williams:	Yes. Didn't we speak about Johnson? Was it Johnson?
M.W.:	No, we talked about Eisenhower.
Buster Williams:	Yes, I am kind of confused with Johnson and Eisenhower.
M.W.:	Johnson took over after Kennedy was assassinated.
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	He was all southern, Texas southern man. Did that reflect, you think, in his presidency?
Buster Williams:	He did a good job.
M.W.:	He did a good job?
Buster Williams:	Yes. He did a good job. He followed up Kennedy's program. He did what Kennedy was going to do, I guess. I hope.
M.W.:	I know he was instrumental in the Civil Rights Bill in 1964.
Buster Williams:	Yes, he sent those guards down to Alabama. Johnson.
M.W.:	Then we had President Nixon. He always gets a bad rap. What do you think?
Buster Williams:	I never thought much of Nixon.
M.W.:	You never did. You never trusted him, or what?
Buster Williams:	I don't know. He just didn't look like a president. It's just his appearance. I don't know.
M.W.:	He didn't come across like somebody like Kennedy, for instance, would come across? Over the tv?
Buster Williams:	Right. They called him "Tricky Dick." He was always full of tricks

	and up to something. No, I didn't think too much of Nixon.
The 1970's	
M.W.:	Let's move on to the 1970's. I know I would guess, imagine probably about that time there was a fair amount of crime and drugs in the City of Alexandria. What do you think about that?
Buster Williams:	We never had too much trouble with drugs. Only in certain areas. They prey mostly on the downtrodden, people in the projects, the youngsters in the projects, people that disadvantaged, low income. That's the only trouble is up there, north end of town, down the "Berg." But around here, they probably use dope, but it isn't open market anywhere around here. You see those boys on the corners in the Berg. You see them on the corner up here in this project. But you never see nobody around in this area.
M.W.:	So you still consider this pretty safe around here?
Buster Williams:	Yes, for [from] drugs.
M.W.:	How would you best describe the 1970's?
Buster Williams:	Well, the '70's, I was mostly a free man -- from work. I left. I retired in [19]73. After that I went to work for an old lady in Old Town. And she shipping around to all her friends. And I did her work as handy man I worked from seven to three, seven to four, til '80, '80, '89, as a handyman. Twenty years in Old Town. So, I wasn't out too much during that time. I was busy.
M.W.:	You were busy. Did you prefer to be that way? Did you prefer to be busy?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	Productive? Did you feel productive?
Buster Williams:	Yes. I had plenty of time. I had the weekends. I would go on trips. Different places: New Orleans, Miami, Florida, New York, Atlantic City. I had plenty of time. To go where I wanted. To see the sights. I even got to go to a place where I had always wanted to go to -- Mardi Gras. I went to the Mardi Gras in New Orleans during that time. So I really enjoyed it.
	So you have some fond memories of that?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
The 1980's and 1990's	
M.W.:	This is going to bring us up to the present time -- the 1980's and 1990's. Living in this period of time, do you feel that the overall quality of life has increased or decreased since..?
Buster Williams:	It has increased.
M.W.:	For what reasons, do you think?
Buster Williams:	It has increased because conditions are better. You're free to go to store and choose your own style of anything you want for food, clothes, furniture, everything. It's a better time; better than ever

	before. For everybody. There are people that are given a choice of life. The aged, the sick, and the poor are better now than any time in life. People bring you food, pay your rent, take you to the doctor, take you to the hospital. Yes, things are much better now then they ever have been.
M.W.:	So it was a good time for you, as far as that's concerned?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
Best Memories	
M.W.:	Looking back in the past at your life, what do you think are some of the happier times in your life in the past? Through your childhood?
Buster Williams:	Well...
M.W.:	What are some of your better memories that you have?
Buster Williams:	My best memories was (sic) during the '20's. That was the best time of life. The good time. That was the good time.
M.W.:	This is when you were with your grandmother? Living with your grandmother?
Buster Williams:	Yes, I was living with my grandmother.
M.W.:	What kind of woman was she?
Buster Williams:	Beg your pardon.
M.W.:	What kind of woman was she?
Buster Williams:	She was just old, reliable woman and stayed home. Cooked, sewed. She never took her glasses off. As far as she take her glasses was take them off her eyes and put them on her forehead. And she kept a sewing basket, and a needle in her hand. And cooked. Loved to cook anything.
M.W.:	Did she do a lot of baking too?
Buster Williams:	Yes, cook, bake, everything from rice pudding to pies, cakes. And at that time they made what you call a "roly poly." A roly poly is something to put fruit in and take the dough and roll it over and bake it. Like cherries.
M.W.:	Almost like a turnover or something?
Buster Williams:	Yes, but it was a great big thing... slice off it. I wouldn't be a turnover. It would be a turnover, but it would be a big one. Yes, we had plenty to eat; always had plenty to eat. Plenty of clothes, plenty of good warm clothes. But we weren't comfortable in our homes, because the house was so open. The houses were so open. Used to chink up your windows with rags and coats and things. Back in the teens. In the teens and early twenties.
M.W.:	You are talking about they weren't insulated well?
Buster Williams:	No, they weren't insulated at all. No, indeed.
M.W.:	Overall do you feel, I mean you have lived in this area for so long, do you feel this has been a good area for you to live in?
Buster Williams:	Yes, I haven't been out this area.

M.W.:	I mean you have had some happy times like you said, in the 1920's?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	You are pretty comfortable now. It's been a good life for you in Alexandria?
Buster Williams:	Yes, it has been a good life.
M.W.:	You got to know a lot of people I would assume?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	In this area that are...
Buster Williams:	I did lots of traveling. One day, two days, three days traveling. I was semi-pro baseball player. I played baseball. I played with Baltimore. Played with teams in Washington, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I barnstormed. During the early [19]20's. Barnstorm's going from town to town.
M.W.:	Was (sic) there any people that you played with that were in minor leagues that became big baseball players, big stars?
Buster Williams:	Yes. I played with Jim York[??], [inaudible] I was before Jackie Robinson. It's before Jackie Robinson. Campanella. I had seen Campanella. Seen Jackie. But I was before them. In the [19]40's. I stopped playing in 1930, during the depression. I stopped playing because I took a job waiting tables. That required me working on Sundays, Saturdays and Sundays. And that was (sic) our main days to play ball. So I quit playing in 1930.
M.W.:	And where were you waiting on tables?
Buster Williams:	I waited Chevy Chase Club, George Mason Hotel, Raleigh Hotel. I did mostly party work.
The Future and the New Millennium	
M.W.:	I know we have the millennium coming up, the year 2000 is coming up pretty soon, next year matter of fact. What do you think are some of the important issues facing Alexandria and the country in general going into the next millennium like this?
Buster Williams:	I don't know. I don't understand it. Looks like it is just the beginning of the end to me.
M.W.:	In what sense?
Buster Williams:	End of everything, end of the world, of everything. Way the people are preparing for it.
M.W.:	So you think they are getting too excited about it?
Buster Williams:	Yes, I think they are making too much of it.
M.W.:	Making too much of it. Just another year?
Buster Williams:	Just another year. Yes, just another year, like 1920. 19[inaudible], 20[inaudible] a whole lot different in '20's and '30's. It was just another decade or something. Another century. I think they are making too much of it.
M.W.:	Looking personally at yourself, living in Alexandria for all these

	years, do you think people around here, people that you know, do you think you made an impact on their lives?
Buster Williams:	Have I?
M.W.:	Yes, personally speaking.
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	In what way?
Buster Williams:	In respect, especially, in character. I get respect from everybody. I have always lived in a mixed neighborhood. This is a mixed neighborhood. The people respect me. Call me Mr. Williams. Maybe, before my face, might call me something else. Yes, everybody respects me. I have a good cong...We have the same thing at church. We have a mixed congregation up at St. Joe's. And, everybody is so nice. Much better now than it was years ago. Although, people are more educated and better condition than there were back in those days because everything was a struggle. Everybody struggled back in those days.
M.W.:	So you feel that you've had an impact on the community then?
Buster Williams:	Yes.
M.W.:	That people respect you because you give respect to them?
Buster Williams:	That's right. That's right.
M.W.:	What comes around goes around?
Buster Williams:	What comes around goes around.
Questions from Buster Williams:	
M.W.:	That just about concludes my interview with you. I have one more question for you and that is something that I am going to leave open to you. If you have any other thoughts or comments that you would like to make?
Buster Williams:	No, I don't have any comments, any thoughts. Just we covered practically everything I had thought of. I can't think of anything in particular. Only thing, the city has grown, has annexed a whole lot of territory. Because as I told you, Alexandria was only about a mile long, from one end the bridge to Second Street up here. It's grown. It's grown to over 100,000 people. As I foretold you, I think that there were only about 6000 people in Alexandria and I knew practically every family, white and black. The name.
M.W.:	By name?
Buster Williams:	Yes. And the City Council, the judges, the clerks. One family kept at it. Callahan's [inaudible] and year after year they all be back in office. But now it's different. Lots of people down there now I don't even know. City Council and so forth, I don't.
M.W.:	I think people are coming from longer distances to work here in town.
Buster Williams:	Yes, that's right.

M.W.:	It is not the same community.
Buster Williams:	No, it isn't the same community. But it's better. Things are better now then they used to be.
M.W.:	I'd like to thank you, Mr. Williams, very much.
Buster Williams:	You're welcome.
M.W.:	As far as on my behalf and as far as the Lyceum is concerned. We will take this...
Buster Williams:	I'm sorry I can't help you any further.
M.W.:	You have been a great help by just agreeing to give us this interview. We appreciate it very much.
Buster Williams:	You are very welcome.
M.W.:	Thank you very much.