



THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER
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CITY OF ALEXANDRIA



Oral History Interview

with

James Lightfoot

Interviewer:

Kerry James Reid

Location of Interview:

Lloyd House, 200 North Washington Street, Alexandria, VA, 22314

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Transcriber: J Orisha

Summary:

James Lightfoot shares his memories growing up in Alexandria, working in the technology sector, and connecting with Douglass Cemetery.

Table of Contents and Keywords

Minute	Page	Topic
00:05	2	Introduction
01:53	3	Childhood
21:48	8	Early Education
39:41	12	Technology Career
58:02	17	Attending Saint Joseph Catholic Middle School
1:07:56	18	Religion
1:18:04	21	Douglass Cemetery Connection
1:38:15	26	Food and Cooking
1:40:12	26	Recommendations and Reflections

General	Childhood; Education; Technology; Career; Food; Religion; Catholic Church; Baptist Church; Segregation; Family; Airforce; Black Owned Businesses; Sports; Computers; Coding; Computer Programming; Funerals; African-American Cemeteries; African-American History; Integration; Catholic School; Religious Differences; Douglass Cemetery; Cemeteries
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James Lightfoot [00:00:05] James Lightfoot, age 76. Today's date is March 14th, 2024, and we are located at the Lloyd House.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:20] My name is Kerry James Reed. I am 27 years of age. It is March 14, 2024, and we are at the Lloyd House. So, thank you so much for agreeing to do this Mr. Lightfoot, it's been an absolute pleasure getting to know you over these past couple of weeks. I suppose we can start from the very beginning. Where were you born?

James Lightfoot [00:00:36] I was born here in Alexandria in 1947.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:41] 1947. Were you born in Alexandria Hospital over there?

James Lightfoot [00:00:45] Alexandria hospital on Washington Street.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:46] Washington street? Okay. What are some of your earliest memories?

James Lightfoot [00:00:53] Some of my earliest memories was my house there on West Street, and I remember, you know, sunny days, basically, playing outside, being with my family. I remember breakfasts, which were really, really good. I always enjoyed eating. [Laughs]. So, I guess it was some of my earliest memories is food.

Kerry James Reed [00:01:20] Absolutely. What kind of breakfast?

James Lightfoot [00:01:22] Oh, typically, you know, eggs, maybe sausage or bacon. And, you know, sometimes, you know, we have pancakes on special days. But eggs and sausage. My mother always made hot rolls. And oh, those were absolutely delicious. Neighbors would, you know, come over, you know, eat hot rolls as well. So, I grew up with that.

Kerry James Reed [00:01:53] Speaking of your neighbors, can you describe your neighborhood for me?

James Lightfoot [00:01:57] My neighborhood was basically segregated, of course. Living on the south side of West Street. I had a number of folks that played with, you know, kids on the block. There was, one white kid down the street from me who lived above a store called Sands Store, which is on the corner of West and Prince Street. And I remember we used to play a lot. He was younger than me, I think. But he could always throw further than me. That really bugged me. [Laughs]. Okay, because, you know, back in those days, you're always competitive. But he had a really, really good arm. One thing that I do remember is that one day, he told me that his mother said that he could not play with me anymore without giving me a reason. So that was the end of that friendship. I saw him, but I couldn't play with him anymore. I don't know the reason why, but just left it as is. And I told my mother she had nothing to say. So that's what it was.

Kerry James Reed [00:03:26] How old were you when he told you that?

James Lightfoot [00:03:27] Oh, I have no idea. Old enough to remember.

Kerry James Reed [00:03:33] Right, right.

James Lightfoot [00:03:35] So I'm guessing maybe about maybe 5, 6, something like that. I'm guessing.

Kerry James Reed [00:03:43] As you mentioned, he could throw farther than you. What were y'all playing, football, baseball?

James Lightfoot [00:03:46] Baseball, football, any kind of ball. We had lots of balls to throw around.

Kerry James Reed [00:03:50] Anything you could throw.

James Lightfoot [00:03:52] Anything to throw. Even rocks, you know? [Laughs].

Kerry James Reed [00:03:57] Can you describe what your home looked like?

James Lightfoot [00:04:03] Yeah. Well, okay, you say home or is it house, but home...home to me is everything involved, you know, how I was treated. Home was, you know, that place of comfort, you know? It was always very comfortable. I had no idea that we were poor. My mother, she worked, my father worked. But it was wholesome. Home was, religious in a sense, because we did go to church every Sunday. I was an altar server at church. I was involved with members of my church. Home was great. Yeah. Loved my neighbors. My next-door neighbor worked at the railroad, which was a railroad company, I guess you would call it, there at King Street right in front of Masonic Temple. So, he worked there. His name was Jim Bowden. I remember him clearly. He'd been old all my life seems [laughs]. He's a lot of my neighbors with it. And next door to him were the Nelsons. We talked about Steve. But it was, his father. Father? So, it would be Steve's grandfather. I remember him very clearly. And his, great grandmother. So, I, the very kind of folks that had a very large family. I enjoy them immensely. I knew all my neighbors across the street. Around the corner. Yeah. So, is a beautiful neighborhood. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:06:13] How would you describe the community in the neighborhood?

James Lightfoot [00:06:18] The community was an assortment of different personalities, of course. We had some of those who had issues with alcohol. I remember my, my father, you know, talking with them. You know, helping them along. Some of my neighbors were, you know, basically abject poverty. And, my mother, you know, would package up some food, you know, and give them. We lived not far from the railroad tracks. I remember very clearly, I was sitting on the front steps and a man came down the street and he asked me, you know, "Is anybody home?" I said, "My mother's at home," so he said he was hungry. So, you know, she packed up some food in the bag and gave it to him, and he went on his way. You know, back in those days, we called them hobos. So, that's the kind of, you know, neighborhood it was. So, a lot of churchgoing folks, and some of those not so church goers. So, you know, it's, I guess you call it [00:07:44] very, very [0.3s] neighborhood. We talked to one another. Yeah, it was very neighborly.

Kerry James Reed [00:07:50] Yeah. You mentioned your mother packing food for hobos. Was that level of altruism taught to you as a child? Were those values that you parents tried -

James Lightfoot [00:08:01] You know, it's strange that you say that. I find myself doing it, not thinking about - it just came natural. You know, I still do those things today. So, I drank the Kool-Aid if you will. [Laughs].

Kerry James Reed [00:08:28] Yeah. So, you mentioned, you call it the Sale Store?

James Lightfoot [00:08:32] They call it Sands, S-a-n-d-s, Sands. Now I might be mispronouncing it, but that's the way I heard it when I was a kid. Right now, I think it's some kind of, yogurt, yoga, place. And strangely, it's owned by some Black folks. [Laughs].

Kerry James Reed [00:08:55] Oh, really?

James Lightfoot [00:08:57] Yeah. So, you can tell things have changed, but most the neighborhood is white. And, I remember going to that, that yogurt place where the Sand's Store was, and then

talking with the folks who know the owners. And I mentioned that I grew up in that neighborhood and told them about some of the memories I had. Now they have issues with some of their neighbors thinking that they're going to be noisy in the neighborhood. So, there's some kind of, you know, back and forth, you know, with them because they're Black and they have some white neighbors, you know? So, I'm not sure how they are overcoming it, but at the time there was an issue.

Kerry James Reed [00:09:50] Yeah.

James Lightfoot [00:09:51] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:09:52] Can you describe any other businesses in the neighborhood that you remember growing up?

James Lightfoot [00:09:56] Yes. I remember across the street, I think now it's called Christ House, it was a grocery store, and I think it was called West Street Market. And that was on the corner of like, Commerce and West, because it kind of joined together. I remember the proprietor there. I remember the nice cold sodas that was in this big chest with ice in it. You would reach down and grab them. Yeah. Those were some of the highlights I remember. There was a Safeway store on King Street, between Payne and West. It was a Safeway store there. I remember going in and buying groceries, and I could imagine that was a very, very small grocery store, but that was the closest one to a house. And it was also another store you may have heard that from some others called Santullo's. Yeah. Oh, we go there from time to time, but mainly I think our main store at that time was with Safeway. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:11:23] Do you remember how to spell Santullo's?

James Lightfoot [00:11:29] S-A-N-T-O-L-A-S. I'm just guessing.

Kerry James Reed [00:11:32] Because every time I ask, everybody, everybody spells it different.

James Lightfoot [00:11:37] Yeah, I don't know.

Kerry James Reed [00:11:40] But the name, the name always stays the same. Right. It's always Santullo's, but no one can ever tell me how to spell it.

James Lightfoot [00:11:48] They get everything for it. [Laughs]. And they had the best pies. They had coconut custard, they had French lemon, oh, man, it was good, cherry pie. I mean, nice sized pies. Yeah. So that was the story. And if you go to Santullo's, you got to go by that Weenie Beanie that was across the street from there on Duke Street. You mind if talk about the Weenie Beanie?

Kerry James Reed [00:12:23] Please do.

James Lightfoot [00:12:25] Anybody talked about that before.

Kerry James Reed [00:12:27] I don't think so.

James Lightfoot [00:12:28] Oh man! Half smoke. Phew! Good. You get a half smoke and a strawberry soda, and that's all you need. Yeah, it was very, very good.

Kerry James Reed [00:12:43] So they give it on sandwiches or how would they serve it?

James Lightfoot [00:12:46] On a hot dog.

Kerry James Reed [00:12:47] Oh, okay. That sounds really good. Oh, man.

James Lightfoot [00:12:52] Yeah, I know it wasn't good for you, but it sure taste good. [Laughs].

Kerry James Reed [00:12:57] Yeah, I'm sure.

James Lightfoot [00:12:58] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:13:00] So you mentioned before, playing with young white neighbor -

James Lightfoot [00:13:08] Beanie, yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:13:10] Were there any areas around the neighborhood that you played in a lot or played around?

James Lightfoot [00:13:16] With him it was basically right there on West Street. We had another neighbor that lived right down the street with him. His name was George Turner, and his father was a trumpet player, I remember that. And so was George. George was so bright. Oh, that guy was smart, man. And he had a brother named Gary. They went to Lyles-Crouch. We played with him. He had a big yard, and I saw his mother a few times, beautiful woman. But I just didn't see her very often. I used to play with another kid around the corner from me, Lorenzo Barnes, he has now passed. You may have even heard of him. I'm not sure. Also, later, when I was old enough to walk around, you know, town freely, I guess must have been 7 or 8, probably later than that, maybe about ten years old, my father allowed me to go to Jefferson Playground. You know where that it is?

Kerry James Reed [00:15:16] Yeah. Loosely.

James Lightfoot [00:15:17] Yeah, and they had a basketball court, and huge field, and tennis court. And I used to love running and jumping over there. We had great times. So, a lot of my friends there that were in high school, you know later we played ball together but yeah. I grew up in that local area around Jefferson and down on West Street. A lot of fun.

Kerry James Reed [00:15:51] Did you ever play in or go to any cemeteries as a child?

James Lightfoot [00:15:59] Yes. I remember my father used to take me to the graveyard. We used to walk from our house over to Penny Hill and visit his father's grave and some other folks who had passed that he knew about. And he cleaned up the gravesites. But he told me to always remember it. So, I still go there from time to time, you know, to gravesites and clean up things. But for the Douglass, I really didn't know about the Douglass cemetery until maybe two years ago when it all came about. And there that I found out that we had some, perhaps relatives, that were buried at Douglass. There were a few Lightfoot last names, so I spoke with Char Barr. You'd like to meet with

her, and she told me that, yes, they were my relatives. So, I got to, you know, dive a little bit deeper to find out more and about those.

Kerry James Reed [00:17:21] So you said your father told you to always remember that your grandfather was buried at Penny Hill. Did he ever explain to you, in his mind why remembering the dead was so important?

James Lightfoot [00:17:36] No. It was kind of baked in as, you know, that you can't forget your ancestors. You know, it just came kind of natural. He might have said it in a different way, but that's what I walked away from, because we did it more than once. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:17:59] What did Penny Hill look like when you were a child?

James Lightfoot [00:18:01] Very much the same way it does now. I know there were some homes nearby, but I can't picture them, but I can only picture how they look today. But it's still looks and feels kind of the same. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:18:17] Do you remember the first funeral you attended?

James Lightfoot [00:18:21] My first funeral? That goes way back. I remember we had a neighbor, who passed. I think it was Jim Bowden, my next-door neighbor, and he had his funeral at Alfred Street Baptist Church. Now, I know they have two buildings there, but it was the very first building there on Alfred Street. Not the new, the call Sanctuary, but it was at the old Sanctuary, and I do remember that. How old I was, I don't know. Very young. Maybe 4 or 5, something like that, I guess.

Kerry James Reed [00:19:16] Do you remember if your parents told you why you were going to a funeral or how they explain death to you, anything like that?

James Lightfoot [00:19:24] Well they didn't have to explain a whole lot, because I kind of felt it. And I remember that it was during a time when, after they embalmed them, you know, and prepared them for the casket, they brought the bodies to the homes, and it would stay there overnight. I remember that he was my next-door neighbor. And I was up all night, you know, because I knew he was next door, you know, the dead body. [Laughs]. And so, I had another neighbor on the other side of me. He lived on the corner of West and Duke Street. And the last name was Ballard. His name was Jim Ballard. And they brought his body home. And I remember his wife coming over to our house and asking if my sister could stay with her overnight while the body was there. [Laughs]. She was older than me, and she didn't want to go.

Kerry James Reed [00:20:40] Right.

James Lightfoot [00:20:41] She cried. She didn't want to go but she went. My mother made her go anyway. [Laughs]. And she still remembers that today. Those kinds of traumatic things that kids have to go through back in those days. So, there you go. Kind of morbid, I know. [Laughs].

Kerry James Reed [00:21:02] A little bit. So, you mentioned that you would go with your father to your grandfather's gravesite at Penny Hill. Did your family have any other funeral rites or traditional practices you observed around funerals?

James Lightfoot [00:21:20] No. I remember that, you know, open casket typically, you know, whether it was a Catholic church, or a Baptist church, typically, you know, open casket. And it was just basically always the same, whether it's Catholic or Baptist, you know, it's still about the same. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:21:48] Where did you attend elementary school?

James Lightfoot [00:21:52] Saint Joseph's elementary school. Right up the street here on Columbia Street. I went there from 1st grade through 7th grade. At eighth grade [I went to] Parker Gray [High School]. Parker Gray went from 8th to 12th. I went to high school there from 8th to 12th grade at Parker Gray.

Kerry James Reed [00:22:21] Why did you attend a Catholic elementary school?

James Lightfoot [00:22:26] That's where my parents sent me. They wanted me to apparently have, you know, a good Catholic education. And I was taught by nuns, Oblate Sisters of Providence, they came out of Baltimore. And I think they were the first nuns Black order in the United States. Oblate Sisters of Providence. Yeah. They're still going today.

Kerry James Reed [00:22:57] What was it like going to Catholic school when you mentioned that your friends, the Turners, they went to Lyles-Crouch. What was it like going to Catholic school and everybody else was going to public school?

James Lightfoot [00:23:09] Didn't mean anything to me. I didn't think there was any difference. You know, we still play the same. We still talked to same. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:23:29] Did you have to wear a uniform?

James Lightfoot [00:23:33] Yes. We had to wear maroon and white.

Kerry James Reed [00:23:35] Maroon and white. Really?

James Lightfoot [00:23:36] Yeah. Not red and white, maroon, and white. [Laughs]. Maroon pants, white shirt, maroon tie, [and] black shoes. That was the uniform.

Kerry James Reed [00:23:50] How were the nuns? Were they nice?

James Lightfoot [00:23:53] Very strict.

Kerry James Reed [00:23:53] Yeah.

James Lightfoot [00:23:55] Nice. They cared about us. I knew that. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:24:06] Was there a reason that you didn't continue to go to Catholic school in high school?

James Lightfoot [00:24:10] Oh, yeah. It wasn't any Catholic school high school open for Blacks. None. O'Connell wasn't there yet. Nor that other - what's the one right there?

Kerry James Reed [00:24:32] Bishop Ireton.

James Lightfoot [00:24:33] Bishop Ireton. Yeah, that wasn't built at the time. Yeah. Saint Mary's was there, as some of the girls went to Saint Mary's. I don't think there's any other.

Kerry James Reed [00:24:53] What was it like going to Parker Gray after Catholic School?

James Lightfoot [00:24:56] Oh man, a lot of fun.

Kerry James Reed [00:24:57] Really?

James Lightfoot [00:24:57] Yeah, I enjoyed that. I knew a lot of folks there from a neighborhood. I used to go to football games as a young kid. You know, Friday Night Lights. [Laughs]. That was fun! And they used to serve hot dogs, potato chips, you know? That's when I was a young kid and my father used to take me there, and I used to enjoy it, you know? So, now, you know, I still see some of the older guy used to play football, you know, years back, you know, and a few of them still hanging around. But it was very, very enjoyable. Loved it. Yeah, it was cool.

Kerry James Reed [00:25:48] Did you play ball at Parker Gray?

James Lightfoot [00:25:50] Yeah, I played football for Parker Gray, and I enjoyed it a lot, [and] a lot of my teammates, real rah-rah kind of stuff, you know.

Kerry James Reed [00:25:58] What position did you play?

James Lightfoot [00:26:00] I played offensive tackle. I also played some defense as well, but mostly I was the offensive player.

Kerry James Reed [00:26:08] Okay. Very cool. So aside from the football games, are there any other really special memories that stick out?

James Lightfoot [00:26:16] Oh, yeah. I also played in the concert band. I played trumpet. I remember going to summer band class before going to the eighth grade. And that's where I learned how to play a trumpet, and I enjoyed that. And, as we went along, they had a jazz band, and I also played in the jazz band as well. So, I played in the concert band and the jazz band. Didn't play the marching band because I was, you know, I was playing football at the time. But I enjoyed playing music with my classmates. Yeah, it was a lot of fun. Yeah. And the band director was Mr. Dawkins. You might know Nolan, he's a judge down here. He was his older brother. He was phenomenal. Yeah. So that was a lot of fun.

Kerry James Reed [00:27:23] So what kind of jazz music did y'all play? Were you playing like Memphis?

James Lightfoot [00:27:29] What kind of jazz was it? The memories go back, you know, to the jazz that had rhythm to it, like take five.

Kerry James Reed [00:27:48] Okay.

James Lightfoot [00:27:48] You know, and that kind of, you know, thing. Okay. I love take five.

Kerry James Reed [00:27:56] Do you have a favorite jazz artist?

James Lightfoot [00:27:58] Miles Davis.

Kerry James Reed [00:27:59] Miles Davis. Yeah.

James Lightfoot [00:28:00] What else can I say?

Kerry James Reed [00:28:02] The king. Absolutely.

James Lightfoot [00:28:04] I remember Al Hirt too as well. You familiar with Al Hirt?

Kerry James Reed [00:28:09] Not as familiar as I am with Davis and some others, but I've heard of him.

James Lightfoot [00:28:13] Louis Armstrong, Freddie Hubbard, you know, some of those guys. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:28:18] Absolutely. Do you still play?

James Lightfoot [00:28:21] Oh, no. It's, you know, playing brass instrument, you have to develop your aperture, your lip. And if you don't play for a while, you lose it.

Kerry James Reed [00:28:37] Really?

James Lightfoot [00:28:37] Oh yeah. So, it's something that you got to keep doing. As opposed to maybe other instruments like woodwinds. You just blow into it. But you got to purse your lips, you know, [for] trumpets. You got to keep that going.

Kerry James Reed [00:28:57] So you mentioned to me before that your white friend's mother said that he couldn't play with you anymore. Was that when you became aware of the racism and segregation in Alexandria?

James Lightfoot [00:29:13] Oh, no. I knew it before then, because I knew where I lived, and I knew other folks lived right around the corner from me. My father always told me about the building that if I looked out my bedroom window, you can just see, the old slave house that was there. I think it's 1310 Duke Street. And from that house back to Payne Street, white folks lived in that block. But on a corner was a Black woman. But there was a feel between her house and the slave house. Now there's a building there today, but before it was an open lot. Okay. It had trees in it you know, but that slave house, there's some really, really poor white folks living in that house.

Kerry James Reed [00:30:23] Really?

James Lightfoot [00:30:24] Oh my gosh. Yes. And he told me about it, and I remember going to that slave house. Oh, it must've been several years ago, and had a tour. Went down to the basement and, their basement, you know, they had cells down there, and they had shackles and stuff like that. And on the wall was a name Shanklin. I said, "Shanklin?" I was in school with a guy named Shanklin. His name was Sammy Shanklin. He passed, and we're the same age. He and my father were very good friends. And the Shanklins have been in Alexandria just as long as my family has been in Alexandria. So, perhaps you know, he probably from his descendants. So, I told him about it, but we didn't discuss it very much after that. So, yeah, I knew about that. I knew that we were separate. You know, one of the reasons why they built Saint Joseph's here is because Blacks could not go to Saint Mary's, and they went to Saint Mary's they had this certain section that they had to go to, but they could not receive communion. So, Saint Joseph was built by Katherine Drexler. You know Drexel University? So, she helped fund, you know, the parish. Major funding came from her, and that's how Saint Joseph was built, because we couldn't go to any other church in this area.

Kerry James Reed [00:32:31] So could you describe your father for me?

James Lightfoot [00:32:36] Yeah. He was strict. Hard worker. Excellent carpenter. He could build anything. I remember him building a picnic table for us, and for the backyard Adirondack chairs. Anything in the house that broke, he could fix it. He was very good with his neighbors and helping folks any kind of way he could. Yeah. He used to hang with the guys in neighborhood that had struggled with alcohol [and] talk with them. He was a good dad.

Kerry James Reed [00:33:36] Yeah, absolutely. Can you describe your mother for me?

James Lightfoot [00:33:40] Extremely hard worker. Oh my gosh! Unrelentless. She did a lot of work. I guess mostly like day-work for white folks. She was very well educated. She was a good reader. She read a lot. She had a lot of good friends. She talked on the phone quite a bit. [Laughs]. Excellent cook. Oh my gosh! My father's from Alexandria, but my mother from Louisiana. And all the nice recipes she brought with her. So, we grew up, you know, eating well and she was a wonderful mom and she worked here in Alexandria for Head Start. Right there on Princess Street. You know where Jefferson Villages is? They have that recreation center right there on the corner.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:05] I think that's Princess Street.

James Lightfoot [00:35:07] Yeah. Princess street. There used to be a school there. And so, she worked their early education, and she loved it. So, my mom was very instrumental for the women and families in the area.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:33] So I assume that it was your mother who was Catholic coming from Louisiana.

James Lightfoot [00:35:38] My mother and father were Catholic.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:39] They're both were Catholic.

James Lightfoot [00:35:43] My mother belonged to Lafayette Parish. The name of the church was Holy Ghost.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:56] Interesting.

James Lightfoot [00:35:57] Yeah. And it's still there today.

Kerry James Reed [00:36:05] So you mentioned to me previously that your father would take you up by the train tracks and try to teach you life lessons. Could you remember any of the things that he tried to instill in you?

James Lightfoot [00:36:23] He always told me, "Always take care of your mother." I walked away with that as the most resounding of all. So, you know, conversations, maybe about family and taking care of family.

Kerry James Reed [00:36:54] During these discussions, did the topic of family history ever come up at all?

James Lightfoot [00:37:00] I know he had a sister. And she's passed. He had two sisters. And of course, they both passed. And he was only son. His father lived in that same house on West Street. And his father died maybe two years before I was born. And his mother passed, I guess, before him. So, he did tell me a little bit about that. He also mentioned that his father, or maybe his grandfather, I'm not sure which, helped build Masonic Temple. And he was a plasterer. I'm not sure if it was his father or his grandfather. But they're very instrumental in building the Masonic Temple.

Kerry James Reed [00:38:26] Interesting. So, I know you have very long career in technology. When you were at Parker Gray, was there a big focus on technology while you were there?

James Lightfoot [00:38:44] No, there was a focus on Business Administration. That's the course that was closest to computers that they had there. But there wasn't any focus on it at the time. I think when I remember, you know, there was talk about a change in the business sector. And that change was being, like, automated, but there weren't any courses, you know, there that they guided you towards that except, you know, understanding accounting, things like that. You know, how to type, how to write letters, so that's about it.

Kerry James Reed [00:39:41] When was the first time you saw a computer?

James Lightfoot [00:39:45] The first time that I saw a computer that I recognized was when I was in the military. I was supporting the military [00:39:58] end of [0.3s] command. That's called Mac. And they had a huge supply depot. And when you ordered supplies and any items that come out of this whole warehouse, it was all managed through computers. And it was like a Univac computer that they had there. And I believe they may even had an IBM. And I used a machine called a KRS35, I believe it was. And that was a paper tape machine. It had a keyboard, and then the output was paper tape. And then you take the paper tape and then you could feed it into another computer. And also, there were punch cards as well. So, when we were in this order processing system, when you order, the order would come across on a Hollerith card, which is a punch card. And, then it's all punched up, you know, through the machine, and then you submit that into the mainframe, which is that Univac. And that's how things, you know, moved along. And they also had pneumatic tubes. You can also shove things up the Mac tube and it goes over to the computer, and they take the cards out or whatever you have and shoved into a computer. That was back in the day. I think that was, that was the beginning of it all. I also remember I got out of service, then after leaving this area, I

went to live in Massachusetts, and the first computer that I used was a Honeywell 200 series computer. And the site that I was using it was at a demonstration building, you know, [they] show customers the progression of their machines and their ingenuity where they're moving on to the next phase of their new product development. And, at the low end of it was this Honeywell 200 series, and you had to bootstrap it. And the way you bootstrap it is that you had to understand octal, you know, the zeros and ones. So, you punch in the 0s and 1s. And that's where I got started, then moved up to the keyboards. So ground up. Yeah, it was fun.

Kerry James Reed [00:43:34] What branch did you serve in?

James Lightfoot [00:43:38] Air force.

Kerry James Reed [00:43:38] Air force. Okay. And you mentioned a supply depot. Where were you stationed?

James Lightfoot [00:43:44] I was stationed at Travis Air Force Base, California, for four years.

Kerry James Reed [00:43:51] And then it was during this time that you learned how much you enjoyed working with technology and everything. Was this interest in technology something you expected to get out of the Airforce? Did you go in there to -

James Lightfoot [00:44:08] Oh, I knew that it would be very, very difficult for me to do that in the Air Force. I remember there was Black man who I think he was a chief master sergeant, and I could see him in the computer room, but there was only one. And when you see only one, you know it can be hard for you to get there. But when I got out, you know, looking back, I was still the only one. Working at Honeywell, working at Digital Premier Corporation, it was the same way. From being a computer operator, I moved up to a computer programmer. And I used to program computers. So, I really enjoyed that a lot. But I still find myself [00:45:11] it's been your mind [0.6s] doing it. There was another older guy, and he started out being a programmer. I had no idea what he was working on, but there was another older man there. It goes by that.

Kerry James Reed [00:45:37] Where did you go after the Air Force to learn about technology?

James Lightfoot [00:45:41] Northeastern University.

Kerry James Reed [00:45:42] Northeastern University.

James Lightfoot [00:45:44] In Boston.

Kerry James Reed [00:45:48] Were you the only Black person in many of your classes?

James Lightfoot [00:45:56] Oh, yeah!

Kerry James Reed [00:45:55] Really?

James Lightfoot [00:45:56] Almost every last one of them. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:45:59] What was that experience like to be in a burgeoning field surrounded by white peers trying to learn technology?

James Lightfoot [00:46:11] I just loved the technology. I didn't let it bother me.

Kerry James Reed [00:46:14] Yeah.

James Lightfoot [00:46:16] So, kind of kept to myself, of course. But I just enjoyed it.

Kerry James Reed [00:46:24] What is it about technology and computers that fascinates you and interests you so much?

James Lightfoot [00:46:29] I think it's because the way my brain works.

Kerry James Reed [00:46:32] Okay.

James Lightfoot [00:46:32] That's about all [laughs].

Kerry James Reed [00:46:33] Yeah. Fascinating. So, you mentioned Honeywell and Digital Equipment.

James Lightfoot [00:46:44] I have. You ever heard of those guys before?

Kerry James Reed [00:46:45] I have. Where did you work first?

James Lightfoot [00:46:48] Oh when I got out of service? I worked for Xerox.

Kerry James Reed [00:46:51] Xerox.

James Lightfoot [00:46:52] Yeah, right here in in Roslyn. When I got out of service, that was the first company I worked for, and I was a Report and Measurements clerk there. And I left there, and I knew I needed some education. So, that's when I headed off to Massachusetts.

Kerry James Reed [00:47:17] And then after you got your degree, what was your first job in the technology sector?

James Lightfoot [00:47:23] Oh, I was working in [the] technology area before I got my degree. What Northeastern would allow you to do is to learn there - my teacher was the one who got me employed at Honeywell because he worked at Honeywell. So, he saw me in class, and had some interest in me that I can go somewhere with it.

Kerry James Reed [00:47:56] So you mentioned working with the Honeywell 200 series and showing people how that worked. So, when you were giving these demonstrations about the technology and Honeywell to people. What were the reactions at learning this new technology, because I imagine at this time it's like pretty novel.

James Lightfoot [00:48:16] Yeah, it was. I can remember it kind of clearly, you know, you standing on a computer, and you have someone there describing the hardware and the software that was

being done behind the scenes. And audience is sitting there. I would say the whole floor was raised. The audience off to the side with curtains, and they pull the curtains back and you see the audience, and they would look at you, and you start demonstrating. You had a Honeywell 200, I think it was a 1400, and then it was a 2000. And then you go from computer to computer showing them different things. And I remember there was one demonstration, you know bootstrapping it, and then you show them the output. You know, it comes out and this was all during a time when printers had print hammers. If you do it right, it makes music. Okay, so you print the image, but the output is music like *Mary had a Little Lamb* or whatever it is. Then you had the reels, the magnetic tapes on the reels, and so you program it. Okay. I'm running the program on the operating system, and then that kicks in the reels to turn forward and backwards like that. And it also had music comes out of those as well. So, everybody's just in awe of that, right, but you're not doing a lot of things. So, those are the kind of demonstrations where they're showing some folks some of the new technologies, you know?

Kerry James Reed [00:51:00] Absolutely. What was the first programing language that you learned?

James Lightfoot [00:51:06] COBOL.

Kerry James Reed [00:51:06] COBOL, okay. And how many do you know now?

James Lightfoot [00:51:20] Right now, I guess it changed so widely. I tell you what I've learned, okay. COBOL, Fortran, and that that goes way back, assembler language, Pascal. But I don't do any programing at all today. I use tools. Behind the tools you have your programing languages. So, I don't do any of that nowadays. But if you take a look at the tools, if you understand programing languages, you understand how they run. So, I can pick up on it pretty easily. I can do a lot of things now much faster than I ever could if I would have programmed. So, technology is moving extremely, extremely fast. But if you understand some of the basics, it's really easy to catch on to moving fast. So yeah, programing, I'll leave that to the programmers. I'm in a whole different area right now.

Kerry James Reed [00:52:33] What are you doing right now?

James Lightfoot [00:52:35] Oh consulting.

Kerry James Reed [00:52:39] What has it been like to work in a field that has such rapid change over the years?

James Lightfoot [00:52:45] Oh I enjoy the progression. I can see it. I understand it in sense of how to use it. I know nowadays they talk about artificial intelligence, but if you use it properly you can make a lot of gains in it. So, the way I think and understand that technology is a good match. I think at least for me right now.

Kerry James Reed [00:53:30] Yeah. I know you're still working in the industry, but over the course of your career, are there any memories that that stick out, particularly in technology, like any moments of triumph or anything like that?

James Lightfoot [00:53:45] Actually, right now, I think this is one of the biggest right now that we are in right now. If folks really understood the power of artificial intelligence and what it can do for

you. It can really change for the better. [It can] get things done quicker [and] change lifestyles. For the life of me I don't know why people still go into the office. You can do everything from home. Meetings from home. Products can be developed from home. I think that in terms of commerce, working at home can really save a lot.

Kerry James Reed [00:54:35] Yeah. When was the first time you heard about AI being developed?

James Lightfoot [00:54:39] Oh for years. Oh my gosh, it goes back to the 80s. I remember I was a systems analyst. And this was at Digital. I remember they had a World's Fair at Digital, and they needed somebody to demonstrate what Digital was doing in terms of artificial intelligence. And there they had a natural language query system that they were using with their hardware product line and in all their product line with vaxxes. And I demonstrated a natural language query system to the audiences at the Digital World Fair. And that was in Boston, at Boston Harbor. Yeah. Have you heard of QE2 ship?

Kerry James Reed [00:56:00] I can't say I have.

James Lightfoot [00:56:01] They had oceanic, and QE, and QE2 docked right there at Boston Harbor, and I was aboard the QE2. And they had people come aboard the QE2, and I was demonstrating the software. Yeah, it was fun, man [laughs]. I was just a young pup. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:56:31] So throughout your career have you seen more Black Americans get involved in the industry since your time began?

James Lightfoot [00:56:40] More and more. I remember. Not a whole lot. Even nowadays, I see some today. Of course, we see a lot today, but I don't know a whole lot of them. But I know they're around.

Kerry James Reed [00:57:14] Have you seen what the archeologists are doing at Douglass, by any chance?

James Lightfoot [00:57:19] Yes. I went down there. Must have been about two weeks ago.

Kerry James Reed [00:57:25] Okay.

James Lightfoot [00:57:25] And I saw them working in the yard. They were doing some excavating or whatever they were doing down there. I didn't ask them what they were doing, but I just knew that's why the truck was out front. You know, the people in the yards were on the grave side.

Kerry James Reed [00:57:42] Have you seen the digital mapping that they've been doing of the various grave sites?

James Lightfoot [00:57:48] No.

Kerry James Reed [00:57:48] Oh man, you should ask archeology to show you that. It's absolutely fascinating. Especially for someone that's interested in technology like yourself.

James Lightfoot [00:57:55] Oh, okay. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:57:56] Yeah, it's really interesting.

James Lightfoot [00:57:58] Okay, cool.

Kerry James Reed [00:58:02] So briefly, before we move on to talk about Douglass a little more, I was hoping we could talk about your memories of, Saint Joseph's here in Alexandria. What memories do you have about Saint Joseph from your time growing up aside from school?

James Lightfoot [00:58:23] Okay. I remember the meals that they used to have. They used to serve lunch, and the lunches every day was basically the same thing. It was hot dogs, Briggs hot dogs on a hot dog bun, and they used to have Wise potato chips. It seems like all my early memories of food, right? [Laughs]. Then they had cheese sandwiches. They used to serve them on hamburger buns. And those are your choices. During the week, you know on Fridays, the one thing that added to that, were no hot dogs because you can't eat meat on Fridays. So, we had the cheese on the hamburger bun, or you get tuna fish on a hamburger bun. Just a little bit of tuna fish. But it was so good [laughs]. And of course, Wise potato chips. So those are the kind of meals that they had there. And they had milk, chocolate, or white milk. I remember the teacher had two grades per classroom, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th and 8th. Okay, that's how that worked. And then once they get rid of the 8th grade, you just had 7th in that one room. The teachers were very good. We had to do homework. I guess the guys I knew, they were Catholic. They served mass, you know, altar service. [01:00:36] I remember first Communion in Congressional was all white. Confirmation I think was also all white. Two confirmations. [8.6s] So yeah, I thought it was healthy.

Kerry James Reed [01:00:51] Yeah. How did you get to Saint Joseph's?

James Lightfoot [01:00:56] From West Street to Saint Joseph's we had to walk. Other mode, you can catch a bus right there in front of Sand's store around the corner from me. And that will take you down street to Washington Street, and you get off at North West. You know where that is? And you walk from here, you know, to the school. Later on, we did that, but most times we just walked. Yeah. And I remember getting on the bus that typically you stand in the back of the bus. Yeah, I do remember that. Yeah, as a kid I remember they always say, "Don't sit there. You got to sit in the back."

Kerry James Reed [01:01:50] What was that like trying to go to school and being told to sit in the back of the bus?

James Lightfoot [01:01:55] Did what I was told. I remember even when my parents used to go down to King Street and everybody stopped into Murphy's, and he had to go to bathroom. There was a "colored" bathroom. They said, "Colored men," "Colored women," and "white men" and "white women." Water fountains, "Black water fountain," and a "white water fountain." I remember that even today. Right down here in Alexandria. I remember one day, specifically we were on the way back home, and I smelled hamburgers. Oh, it smelled so good coming out of a restaurant here on King Street. I said, "Mom, can we have a hamburger?" She said, "When we get home, I make you one." You know we couldn't go in there, right? It didn't register at that point. You know, but that's what it was all about. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:03:13] Absolutely.

James Lightfoot [01:03:15] Yeah. So, I do have memories. But, you know, I was so young it didn't hurt me at the time. But when you get older, you realize that's not right.

Kerry James Reed [01:03:29] Did you have a favorite meal that your mother would make, by any chance? Because your favorite memories seem to involve food.

James Lightfoot [01:03:37] It's a whole lot of them. You know, I do remember, like pork shoulder. I remember eating ribs, there were barbecue. I remember she used to make this barbecue shredded pork, and she put some kind of barbecue sauce on it, on a bun, and that was heavenly. And make that fresh potato salad. Oh! [Laughs]. But her rolls were to die for the. My friends used to come over and they just eat rolls with butter and just scarf them down. But yeah, a lot of good meals. Ham! I think she put brown sugar, pineapple, and cherries and decorated it all around with cloves in it. And you know, like I say, she made that for Sunday. And then for lunch, you know, she'll fix me a sandwich. I'd take my knife to school as opposed to eating the hot dogs over there, and she's making sandwiches, and the way she would cut the bread. Everything would look so nice. And she put the ham on the rolls. Guys, used to see my ham sandwiches and they want some so bad, so I used to share my sandwich with the kids. And they used to love it man! "What you got in your bag, man?!" They would ask for food [laughs]. Yeah, so those were some good ham sandwiches.

Kerry James Reed [01:05:49] That sounds like it. Yeah.

James Lightfoot [01:05:51] And today I don't eat pork. But thing is, my memories are so good, you know, I -

Kerry James Reed [01:05:57] You don't need to.

James Lightfoot [01:05:58] It doesn't bother me, yeah. I know it can't get any better. That's okay. So, I don't eat it.

Kerry James Reed [01:06:05] Oh man, I wish I could try those. Sounds absolutely fabulous. So, can you describe what the school at Saint Joseph looked like when you were going there?

James Lightfoot [01:06:20] Actually, the exterior still looks the same. The playground, it wasn't asphalt. I think it was probably dirt or grass, I don't remember. I remember we used to line up to walk into school, you know. First thing you do, you get there at a certain time, [and] you don't ever want to be late. I don't think I was ever late for class. But when it was time to go in, you line up and then you go in by grade. So, at a very early age I learned how to take command.

James Lightfoot [01:07:14] Yeah.

James Lightfoot [01:07:17] So lining up and doing things that way is very military if you will, how we did things. And we had a place in line who you stand in front of, or who stayed behind. You knew your place in line. So, that's how it was. They ring that bell, you can go in. Very organized.

Kerry James Reed [01:07:47] So you mentioned to me previously that your wife isn't Catholic. She's Baptist?

James Lightfoot [01:07:56] That's right.

Kerry James Reed [01:07:56] Thank you. Could you describe what differences you've noticed in services? In Baptist services as opposed to mass?

James Lightfoot [01:08:10] Here's one thing that I really noticed, and it's the relationship between the parishioner and whoever is the pastor. And the Catholic church, you know, it's a little bit lax. As a matter of fact, I brought this to the attention of my priest here who was white. We have a tendency to talk to the deacon by his first name, not by Deacon such and such. Even at mass, they call him by the first name. You go to Baptist church, and I attend church with my wife sometimes, that pastors always called the Deacon by Deacon second and such. Show all respect. Catholics are not that way.

Kerry James Reed [01:09:47] Really?

James Lightfoot [01:09:48] Really.

Kerry James Reed [01:09:48] That's interesting.

James Lightfoot [01:09:49] Really. And to bring my point, an incident happened in my church, must be about a month ago, and I told my priest. I wrote a letter. I told him what he did during church service. He called our deacon, who is Black, by his first name. You shouldn't do that. And I wrote a really nice letter. And then the next Sunday, I didn't go to church because I was sick, so I got on YouTube. You can get mass that Sunday from YouTube. And he called him by first name twice to ensure service as pastor and deacon. That time I wrote a letter to the bishop. I told him what happened. We're down to Alexandria jail, where I serve as a helper in getting church service set up for the inmates there. And the bishop attended, and I asked the bishop why he was there. I asked him, you know, offline, "Did you receive my letter?" He said no, he hadn't seen it, but he will look for it. To this day I never got a response back from the bishop about the issue. But since then, the priest now calls the deacon, Deacon now, you know, even at service, he doesn't use his first name like he used to. So, some things are baked in. You got to, you know, break it down a little bit and make your point. So, it was hard to crack, but I did it.

Kerry James Reed [01:11:55] Why was this issue of acknowledgment of proper titles so important to you?

James Lightfoot [01:12:08] Here's my point to this. I remember my mother working for white folks and she was always older. Younger folks often called her by her first name, and she always called them Mr., Mrs. My father was the same way, you know. They always called him by his first name. He was always older. That's those hits, man. No matter where you are. You know, you're never equal leveled. You are always a second-class citizen in a way. You never reach that area where, you know, it's to me respectful. Yeah. So, it bugged me. It always bugged me. So, you know, that's where we lived in Alexandria. You're baked in.

Kerry James Reed [01:13:19] So what has it been like to live with someone who doesn't share your exact faith? Did you alternate services or how does that work?

James Lightfoot [01:13:35] My wife went to Saint Joseph's for a while. And she's been going to Baptist church all her life. It's something about it she just didn't like. And then, I can see it myself. You know what I'm saying? Come on, man! This ain't right? [Laughs]. So, I don't have a problem with it. I go to her church. I respect her folks. You know, she respects the Catholic Church to a certain extent. But, you know, it's just not her. Her way of giving back.

Kerry James Reed [01:14:14] Have you noticed any different funerary rites in in Catholic Church as opposed to Baptist church?

James Lightfoot [01:14:25] I've been to a number of Baptist funerals. I think they're kind of similar. But the funeral rites for Baptists are more geared to the way the person lived their life. But in the Catholic Church, they're talking about something biblical. You know? Come on, man! And it's the same way at mass. You should listen to them talking about the Pharisees and Sadducees and all that. [Laughs]. But then you go to the Baptist church and they're talking about life, you know, right and wrong in the way people live their lives, which is totally different! And how do you relate to that? You can't keep young folks in church listening to that! You know, what happened way back. You got to bring it to today's times, I think. Then they start reading the names of some of those folks back in the Bible, and then you have real life people here today. You know, why don't you use some current day and see how you can map it.

Kerry James Reed [01:15:53] Yeah.

James Lightfoot [01:15:54] But there's no joining, you know. So, you're kind of left out in the open hand. How can I relate that to my life today? But somehow, I think the Baptists can do that. That's a that's a huge chasm.

Kerry James Reed [01:16:12] Yeah, absolutely. So, we've sort of talked about it a little bit or at least the idea has been brought up a little bit about how your faith has changed over time. I guess could you speak to that? You know, going to Catholic school and then now of being in Baptist services and things like that. How has your faith changed?

James Lightfoot [01:16:39] You know, I think deep down, my faith has never changed. That's the reason why I haven't left my faith. I believe in God. I believe in what's right. I know there's some people in my faith who do bad things. Everybody does some bad things, you know. But you try to work within yourself. Know yourself first. So, I'm not switching or saying which is better, but I'm staying where I am. I can read the Bible. Whether it's the Catholic Bible or the Baptist Bible. I can make my own decisions of that. I won't just read, you know, Catholic material. I read other material as well and make my own decisions. So, you got to know the world around you. You know, show respect. No matter what.

Kerry James Reed [01:17:43] Absolutely.

James Lightfoot [01:17:44] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:17:47] So much of the life that we've been talking for about an hour and 20 minutes at this point has been fabulous. Before we move on to questions about Douglass, is there anything else you would like to discuss?

James Lightfoot [01:17:56] No.

Kerry James Reed [01:17:57] Okay. Terrific. So, you mentioned that you last visited Douglass around two weeks ago?

James Lightfoot [01:18:04] Just about.

Kerry James Reed [01:18:04] Okay. When was the first time you remember visiting Douglass?

James Lightfoot [01:18:08] Oh, maybe a year ago.

Kerry James Reed [01:18:11] Okay.

James Lightfoot [01:18:12] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:18:13] And what prompted that visit?

James Lightfoot [01:18:18] I got a call. I was working with the SRG, Social Responsibility Group, and they wanted to bring it on as a project because they identified that the grave site was unkept. And we went there, and we saw. But it wasn't until later that I found out I had relatives at the grave. And that spurred it on.

Kerry James Reed [01:18:56] What is the Social Responsibility Group? How did you come to be a member of that?

James Lightfoot [01:19:02] I think I was talking with Michael Johnson, and he talked about it. And then there was another pastor, Lou who is, I guess one of the founding members of the group. And they wanted to focus on seeing how they could improve Alexandria.

Kerry James Reed [01:19:37] So when you first visited Douglass, could you describe what it looked like?

James Lightfoot [01:19:42] Pretty much the same way it looks today. When I first saw it, you can see the water above ground. You know, just ponding over the gravesites.

Kerry James Reed [01:19:58] What were your first thoughts to see a cemetery in that condition?

James Lightfoot [01:20:05] Deplorable. Yeah. No matter where it is, you know, when a grave site is in such disrepair, you have to do something about it.

Kerry James Reed [01:20:32] Absolutely. Yeah. And you mentioned that you didn't know the first time you visited Douglass you had family buried there?

James Lightfoot [01:20:40] No, I didn't know. My father may have brought me by there. I don't remember it.

Kerry James Reed [01:20:49] So when did you find out that you had family buried there?

James Lightfoot [01:20:56] I think less than a year ago. I just looked at grass and said, "Lightfoot?!" [Laughs]. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:21:10] Did you notice the headstones before you were informed by [01:21:14] Char? [0.0s]

James Lightfoot [01:21:17] Oh, no. I knew before I spoke with Char. Because I told Char about it, and I told her some of the names that I saw on a grave and the last name was Lightfoot. One was named Thomas, another William, John, perhaps. And she said, "Yes. Those are your relatives." I said, "Really?! So, I got to find out a little bit more about that." Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:21:49] What was it like to find out that you had relatives buried at Douglass?

James Lightfoot [01:21:55] I was surprised. The thing is Douglass is only yards away from where I was raised. West Street is just right across the way from Douglass. So, it kind of makes sense. You know, that's where they were buried. That's the closest Black cemetery to the house. So yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:22:24] Absolutely. So how many family members are interred there?

James Lightfoot [01:22:33] There are at least two. There could be more. I don't know. I think there's a William Lightfoot, but I don't remember the first names right off hand.

Kerry James Reed [01:22:44] Yeah. So, have you subsequently found out any information about your relatives who are buried there?

James Lightfoot [01:22:54] No.

James Lightfoot [01:22:54] No. I will find out through Char.

Kerry James Reed [01:23:09] So what has it been like working with the Douglass Advisory Group?

James Lightfoot [01:23:16] I find them being very open, being very forthcoming. So, yeah, I find it easy to communicate with them.

Kerry James Reed [01:23:29] Absolutely. Well, what do you think the importance of Douglass Cemetery and the Douglass Advisory Group is?

James Lightfoot [01:23:42] I think for a large part, it has to do with, again, I run back to showing respect to those who have passed on who lived in this area. You don't know the details about their lifestyle. Hopefully you can find out later on. But there's some way that now that we know that they lived here and I guess a lot of the things that we're doing nowadays, you know, is based on progression about the heritage. That's where we come from. It's a progression.

Kerry James Reed [01:24:35] So when I've spoken to people, a lot of them talk about the act of forgetting the gravesite or the cemetery within the community. What do you think that forgetting about your ancestors does to yourself or to the community that you live in?

James Lightfoot [01:24:58] I think there's some mixed feelings there. I can understand why some people don't want to really understand their heritage because they live within the moment. I think it's a little bit more deeper than that, you know. It takes you down to your core. But if you look at the surface level, then, the interest may not be there. I can see how some young folks think. I see it more often and, I wish it wouldn't have to be that way. But it's like teaching history, sometimes you don't want to know. Flat out their too involved with their friends and how they think, and you know, things. I guess amended if you would say, you know, this is a break off. Their life forward. Nothing behind.

Kerry James Reed [01:26:24] Yeah. Absolutely. So, when you last visited Douglass two weeks ago, could you describe what the cemetery looked like for me in detail?

James Lightfoot [01:26:39] I remember there's a thing like a gazebo figure there. There're gravestones that are leaning to the sides. Some are down and into the ground. You can just see the tops of them. It's pretty much in disrepair. You can see where perhaps some gravestones were [and now] there's nothing there. Those are my memories. I mean, there's plaques on the outside, you know, walking towards the cemetery. It describes that it's Douglass Cemetery. You can see the homes butting up against the cemetery. That really bugs me.

Kerry James Reed [01:27:42] Oh really, the homes?

James Lightfoot [01:27:43] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:27:44] Why does it bother you?

James Lightfoot [01:27:45] Because, you know, in my mind, I said there might be some graves that were under those homes, and we never would know about them, but they say there's no graves there, so what could they say? But they can't account for all of the bodies that are there. They're not there. There should be more bodies, but you don't know where they are. So where are they? I don't know. Nobody knows right now.

Kerry James Reed [01:28:28] What do you think it does to the memory of the dead to have what was the Douglass cemetery to be encroached upon by those houses?

James Lightfoot [01:28:41] I think total disregard. I'm not sure any other the folks that already knew that they're going to put their homes there. They just did it because that was a likable part of the neighborhood that they could build some homes. I don't think they thought about it at all, just Alexandria. Same way they do Washington Street. You know that.

Kerry James Reed [01:29:18] Yeah. So how do you describe the Douglass initiative to those who are not familiar with it?

James Lightfoot [01:29:34] I would describe it as showing care for those who lived within this area, [and] that their memorial still exists. That they've been memorialized with respect. I think it should show a lot for Alexandria. You know, and how it treats its citizens.

Kerry James Reed [01:30:16] Very quickly, where are your parents buried?

James Lightfoot [01:30:20] Both my mother and my father are buried at Saint Mary Cemetery. Saint Mary's here in Washington Street.

Kerry James Reed [01:30:33] What does that cemetery look like?

James Lightfoot [01:30:35] Nice. Quiet. Well-kept. Manicured. Yeah. Very different.

Kerry James Reed [01:30:43] What does Penny Hill look like today?

James Lightfoot [01:30:49] Not that well-kept. The last time I was over there I was cleaning out gravesites, those I didn't even know.

Kerry James Reed [01:31:01] When did you do that? When did you go clean off the graves?

James Lightfoot [01:31:05] Oh, Penny Hill, that must have been about two weeks ago.

Kerry James Reed [01:31:10] Do you visit Penny Hill to clean off the graves regularly?

James Lightfoot [01:31:14] Not really, but every now and then, you know, I go down there. Yeah, pull up stuff.

Kerry James Reed [01:31:21] Why do you do that?

James Lightfoot [01:31:24] I don't know. It just in me. It's the right thing to do. You know, I don't know those people, but still, you see overgrowth and you pull weeds that you can see on the gravestones. You can see how the vines run over them. It's a little dirty. Brush it off a little bit. It's the right thing to do.

Kerry James Reed [01:32:03] How do you feel now that the city has taken steps to do things that respect the resting place of your ancestors?

James Lightfoot [01:32:16] I think that's a very noble thing to do. It's the right thing to do. It's always good to give back. It's hard, I guess, for a city to make a lot of things right. You know, right the wrong. But it's an attempt. I think it's more gesture. It's kind of late, you know, but still, you know, it's the right thing to do. Yeah, either way you look at it.

Kerry James Reed [01:32:52] Okay. So, have you ever been to Douglass and seen other people there by any chance?

James Lightfoot [01:33:06] I remember going there with the group from SRG. I think they had some other folks there as well. I think it was last year we all met there. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:33:26] What has it been like to attend these gatherings at Douglass?

James Lightfoot [01:33:33] Kind of solemn to listen to others. You see people that, you know from the neighborhood. There was one guy, Richard Williams. He was married to my father's sister.

Kerry James Reed [01:34:00] Oh, really?

James Lightfoot [01:34:00] Yeah, and I remember him working at the post office right here near Washington Street. You know where that was, right across from Lyceum? And my mother took me down to the post office just to see a Black man behind the counter working at the post office. And that was a key point in my life because we never seen that before. And he had a nice white shirt on, clean, sharp, and that shows you what hard work can do. It can carry you.

Kerry James Reed [01:34:52] Absolutely. Yeah. So, you said he was married to your father's sister. Interesting. That would make him your uncle for a time?

James Lightfoot [01:35:04] Yeah, I call him Uncle.

Kerry James Reed [01:35:10] Have you noticed any other relationships with members of the Douglass Advisory Group come to light, like any in kinship relationships, by any chance?

James Lightfoot [01:35:23] No. Not really. I think as we move further down the line, we might find that we're more connected than we think we are, right? You know, it was really chilling to hear Michael Johnson, talk about his people that he found out that live in Culpeper, Virginia. My father has always told me that we have family in Culpeper, Virginia. That's what I was thinking, the same thing I said, "Mmmh." [Laughs]. So, you never know, you know.

Kerry James Reed [01:36:08] What has it been like to learn about the other descendants in a group?

James Lightfoot [01:36:15] I think we're more connected than we really know. In some ways you probably don't want to know.

Kerry James Reed [01:36:25] Absolutely. So, has learning about your ancestors that are Douglass prompted you to do any research on your own into their lives?

James Lightfoot [01:36:44] Well, yeah, but it's unfinished. I'm kind of relying on Char to help me out with that.

Kerry James Reed [01:36:58] Absolutely. Fabulous. Have you been to any funerals since learning about Douglass, by any chance?

James Lightfoot [01:37:22] I don't think I've been to any funerals. Maybe so.

Kerry James Reed [01:37:27] Okay.

James Lightfoot [01:37:29] I go to a lot of funerals.

Kerry James Reed [01:37:32] I guess I could phrase it another way then, has learning about Douglass made you rethink your previous funeral experiences?

James Lightfoot [01:37:43] No, not at all. No connection.

Kerry James Reed [01:37:47] Okay. Well, we've been talking almost for an hour and 45. This has been an absolute pleasure listening to your stories and getting to know you some more. Before we move on to our closing remarks, is there anything else you would like to discuss?

James Lightfoot [01:38:09] No, I think I covered more than I ever thought I would talk about.

Kerry James Reed [01:38:15] It was terrific. I would love to hear more about your mother's cooking. I swear, everybody comes in here telling me that their mothers are the best cooks. And I believe them too.

James Lightfoot [01:38:27] I was a little fat boy. [laughs]. I got it honestly.

Kerry James Reed [01:38:35] [Laughs]. Do you cook at all?

James Lightfoot [01:38:36] Oh, yeah. I do cook.

Kerry James Reed [01:38:40] Did your mother teach you how to cook?

James Lightfoot [01:38:43] No. Here's how it went. We're out doing whatever we're doing. Come in the house and wash your hands and sit down to eat. I know when she was in the house cooking, I didn't do a whole lot of watching. I knew she was fixing rolls. I knew you know, but I'm not paying attention. I'm doing other stuff. She didn't show me how to cook, but I was always, even if I was in the kitchen, I wouldn't pay any attention to her.

Kerry James Reed [01:39:15] Absolutely. What do you like to cook?

James Lightfoot [01:39:20] Just breakfast foods. I like food out of a bowl.

Kerry James Reed [01:39:27] Okay. All right.

James Lightfoot [01:39:29] You know, just a combination of stuff. Stews and things like that, maybe a little meat mixed in

Kerry James Reed [01:39:37] Yeah. What's your favorite thing to cook?

James Lightfoot [01:39:41] Oh, I like salmon.

Kerry James Reed [01:39:44] Salmon? Okay. What do you do with it?

James Lightfoot [01:39:48] I like baking it. It's more like a roast, you know. And I like to season it a little bit. I like salmon. It's my favorite fish. You know, just something I enjoy eating. I like vegetables too. I love vegetables.

Kerry James Reed [01:40:12] I'm a big vegetable guy myself. Well, fortunately, you can get lunch after this. Making me hungry. [Laughs]. So just some final questions here. What are your hopes for the Douglass Advisory Group moving forward?

James Lightfoot [01:40:32] Oh, my hope is that we could get things settled there in terms of what we want to do next. And the outcome that I'm looking for is that the site would be all settled so we can actually see the gravestones. And it's cleaned up, and we can find those graves that are not accounted for. So those are my hopes right now.

Kerry James Reed [01:41:09] Yeah, absolutely. What are your hopes for Black cemeteries in Alexandria moving forward?

James Lightfoot [01:41:20] You know, my outlook is that once we're gone, we're gone. Okay. And God knows, here their memories, but I think that we owe it to ourselves, and He built this within us so we can have respect for one another. So that to me is a part of everyone. So, what I'm looking for is outcome is that everyone has a vision forward and backwards. And the same respect you have moving forward, you know, backwards as well.

Kerry James Reed [01:42:06] Absolutely. How would you like to see Alexandria treat Black history in the city moving forward?

James Lightfoot [01:42:19] It has to come to light. You know, such as, the lynching. Don't hide it. Let folks know. I can see how Alexandria has changed over the years. The folks on the hill, basically all Black folks, I remember my father taking me up on the hill to visit my relatives that used to live out there. And some of the folks that he knew that lived out there as well I remember meeting George Dawkins when he was a kid. He must have been about 5 or 6 years old. I still remember that. You know, going out in the hill because he lived out there. A lot of my old friends, you know, from that area. I can't bring all that back. It was so neighborly back in those days, how we treated one another, [and] how we cared for one another no matter how poor they were. Just lending a hand when had no one to turn to. Food was scarce for some of them. Just to have a kind word spoken. All that has to change. It doesn't matter what color your skin is. Just do the right thing, you know? I think it's innate in everybody. You can bring it forward.

Kerry James Reed [01:44:11] Yeah, absolutely. And then lastly if you could hold on to one memory forever what would it be.

James Lightfoot [01:44:23] [01:44:23] Seeing it to my family. Yeah. That's it. [4.5s]

Kerry James Reed [01:44:28] Yeah. That's beautiful. Well thank you so much Mr. Lightfoot. It's been an absolute pleasure. We really appreciate it.

James Lightfoot [01:44:35] Thank you.