

NATIONAL ARCHIVES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

Sara Dunlap Jackson

July 5, 1982

at

1910 Kalorama Rd., NW

Washington, D.C.

Interviewed by Rodney A. Ross (National Archives Employee)

Basic Summary abstract prepared by Geraldine Ludwig
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Jackson is an archivist on the staff of the National Historical Publication and Records Commission (NHPRC). As a current Federal archivist her length of government service, which dates from 1943, is exceeded only by that of Kathryn Murphy. Jackson holds a 1976 honorary Ph.D. from the University of Toledo, which was awarded her in recognition for her assistance to researchers at the National Archives.

In her interview Jackson described her educational background and her early job experiences before joining the staff of the National Archives. She then told of her experiences at the National Archives, first with the Military Archives Division and then with the NHPRC. She highlighted her work with certain military record groups and explained the research techniques necessary for effective use of National Archives records.

During the interview she mentioned the names of some of the trainees from the Office of Presidential Libraries whom she had introduced to the holdings of the Office of the National Archives. Toward the end of the interview she discussed racial and sexual discrimination at the National Archives. Also, she told of her interests in Southern, Western, Afro-American and American military history and the nature of her various involvements.

The interview, approximately 40 minutes in length on one cassette, was recorded in Jackson's home. The two parties in the taped conversation can be clearly heard.

Abstract of interview with Sara D. Jackson in Washington, D.C., on July 5th, 1982.

Interviewer: Rodney A. Ross

Tape length: One 60-minute cassette (all of side 1 and ten minutes-worth of side 2).

SIDE 1

PERSONS PRESENT BESIDES INTERVIEWER AND INTERVIEWEE:
Clara Ross and Basil Buchanan

QUESTION: Background prior to joining the government?

ANSWER: Before 1943, when Jackson began working for the Federal government, she had been in school most of the time: two years at Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina 1938-39 to 1940; 1941 until August 1943 at Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina where she graduated. From September through December 1943 she taught at Robert Smalls High School Beaufort, South Carolina. She taught 4th grade. January 6th of 1943 she came to Washington. She stated that her experience was limited. Her degree is in sociology. She had initially wanted to be a social worker instead of a teacher. In Washington she got a job as a clerk in the office of Chief of Finance, which was a part of the War Department.

QUESTION: How did you make the transition from the War Department to the National Archives?

ANSWER: Jackson stated that she was very bored as a clerk. She started looking for a job. She went on vacation and had an interview at the Library of Congress. She was walking down the street past the Archives and thought she would try here. She had been there to visit and knew a little about it. Personnel were glad to have someone walk in off the street; it wasn't done very often. Since she had been a clerk at the office of the Chief of Finance, people at the Archives thought she knew something about military history. Both the Library of Congress, which wasn't going to pay as much, and the Archives offered her a job. She decided to accept the offer from the Archives.

ION: Who were some of the first people that you talked the Archives?

R: They were mainly people in the Personnel office. There was a Mrs. Hennison, who was very interesting and native. When Jackson's transfer from the War Department held up, she was the one who did a great deal to obtain release.

ION: What have you done during the various stages of your career at the Archives?

R: Jackson started out with what is now called the Army Archives Division. She stated that in those days, she started out by following somebody around while they worked (refiling or making searches). Then one day you were allowed to go out on your own. She stated that most of her work at the Archives had been with reference. She had helped out with descriptions. Also, she was the co-author of one report, the Freedmen's Bureau (RG 105) preliminary report. It was not until the 1960's that the Archives got everything together. She mentioned that she was one of the people who worked on the preliminary inventory.

ION: How did you end up working for NHPRC?

R: Jackson said she had worn herself out, or else she felt that the branch did not want her any more and she'd have nothing to do but the lower lists. She asked Wendell Holmes for a job. She transferred at the same time.

ION: You said that in military records Elizabeth Sawyer was one of the key persons that you worked for.

R: Yes. Jackson started out with her plus Elizabeth Sawyer and Lucille Pendell.

QUESTION: What relationship did you have with them?

ANSWER: They were her supervisors. Jackson surmised that they knew that she didn't know much about the work, but they were very patient and kind. Jackson remarked on the kindness of Miss Drewry, especially. They were ladies from the old school. They wanted to get ahead, but they also were concerned about the people they were responsible for.

QUESTION: How did you first meet Oliver Wendell Holmes?

ANSWER: Working at the Archives.

QUESTION: Was he a direct supervisor of yours?

ANSWER: No, she thought in those days he was in charge of what is now Natural Resources: Interior Department and Agricultural Records. When she first realized who he was, he was on the east side with the Interior records. People that he knew in Minnesota were people that Jackson helped a lot. Long before she had ever thought of working for him, those people had told him that he should hire her.

QUESTION: During your years with the National Archives, you have acquired the reputation of knowing more about military records than anybody else in the Archives building. Could you share some of your wisdom as far as if someone wanted to do research in American social history, what record group would you recommend that they start with? Which ones do you think are most valuable and why?

ANSWER: Jackson noted that it was a hard question. She would hope that she would be talking to people who had done some background reading and had some ideas. She said that she would have to convince them to start where she would begin, at home. She knew about the social side of the Army, and so she would start them with Army records. She said that in new countries, in occupied countries, it is usually the Army who is there first.

QUESTION: What record groups are these?

ANSWER: The secretaries, the command records, the social history, the Freedmen's Bureau, as the Freedom History Project is doing now. It's not really fighting battles, it's more a social history.

QUESTION: Do you have at your fingertips what some of these record group numbers are?

ANSWER: Record Group 107: Office of the Secretary of War; Record Group 105: Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands; Record Group 393: U.S. Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920; Record Group 94: Adjutant General's Office, 1780's - 1917.

QUESTION: For something like RG94, what would a researcher discover of a social or military nature if he or she starts using those records?

ANSWER: Jackson stated that they'd find the activities in a particular area, the history of an area, the geology of an area, zoology, ethnic history, the condition of a people (did they need help, or could they make it on their own, should the army protect them), their health, their physical condition, what they were eating, some things about their social life.

QUESTION: If you were asked to tell what your favorite record group was, what would it be? Which one would you say had the richest source of information?

ANSWER: Jackson didn't have a favorite group. She found some a little more challenging than others where you had to think and reason. Record Group 393 was a personal favorite about the Commands of the West, the Indians, the rivers, the mountains, the building of roads. She stated that she wouldn't like to be assigned to just one record group because then whatever she did would be incomplete - you have to move from one to another. She stated that there were some that she would rather not work with, namely, financial records. But, you couldn't say that there wasn't fruitful information even in those records. Looking at figures was not as fascinating to her as looking at a map or reading a media report.

QUESTION: Which records would contain the financial information that you are talking about?

ANSWER: RG217, the auditors. There is good information in it, but there are lots of figures. Paymaster, Chief of Finance - those records of the army or tied in with the army.

QUESTION: Did you deal with Navy records in your career?

ANSWER: Not while she was with Military. Everything she learned about the Navy, she learned while she was with the Commission, since 1968

QUESTION: What are some of the Commission projects that you've worked with?

ANSWER: Most of them, including Jefferson Davis, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, Washington Matthew, Chief John Ross, John Hope, Alexander Hamilton, Henry Laurens, James Madison, Emma Goldman, and Marcus Garvey.

QUESTION: You mention John Hope, who was an educator, why would military records figure in a composite collection of someone like John Hope.

ANSWER: Jackson stated not very much. But the NHPRC brought his records in from his family in Washington. They had to list them, get them sanitized, packed and sent off to Morehouse. Whether the man was a national figure or had some specific connection with the War Department or the Army or Navy, you still check to see if there was some relation. If a person is really out there working with the public, sooner or later he contacts the War Department or they contact him. RG120, American Expeditionary Forces, had records on John Hope. She happened to be working on Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Dubois and found that the YMCA had tried to recruit him to work for them and go overseas during the World War with the military command. At a later period, in the ROTC records and for World War I SATC records, you find bits of information about people like Hope, because he was a president of a school which had ROTC. These are things that you find accidentally, or you reason this out.

QUESTION: In terms of detective work, what has given you the greatest sense of accomplishment?

ANSWER: Jackson stated that she thought the main thing was using your reason, and the next was knowing the function of the Agency. If an agency is building roads, or exploring, and you're working with something like the Joseph Henry project, or the John Wesley Powell project, you know that those people would be involved with exploration, you naturally look there. All of this, she stated was not easy to explain, much of the understanding comes from doing. Once again, the function of the agency is the key, and then work from there.

QUESTION: In recent years you've been training Presidential Libraries new employees in research methods. How did you get into that business?

ANSWER: That was through Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes and Dr. Daniel J. Reed. She expected because she had more experience, was an older person, and probably they thought that this was the way the trainees should be introduced to the Archives. For a while the trainees did not go into the record branches. They spent their four to six weeks, and sometimes more, with the Commission. This was their introduction to what we know as the Office of the National Archives.

QUESTION: What were some of the principles that you tried to instill with your trainees.

ANSWER: Jackson stated that the main one is that those are the records created by the day to day activities of the Federal Government. Then she told them something of the general organization: each record group represents the records of an office. She encouraged them to read the introduction to the inventories, the types of material they could find there. The main thing is that they get a feeling for what is in the Archives - the records, the holdings of the Archives.

QUESTION: Did you deal exclusively with military records or did you cross the boundary into civil records?

ANSWER: Jackson said that she crossed the boundary.

QUESTION: Who have been some of your trainees and where are they today?

ANSWER: Don Schewe is at the Carter project. David Al/sobrook is also in Atlanta, as is Martin Elzy. Martin Teasley is now at the Eisenhower Library. Jeanne Schauble is at the Ford Library. Rod Ross is at the Reagan project. Emily Williams Soapes is at the Nixon Project. Michael Hughes is at the Secretary of Defense Office. David Kyvik is now a writer-teacher at the University of Akron. George Mazuzan and Sam Walker are archivists with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. "These are all famous people," she laughed, "their publications will amaze anybody." She stated she was very proud of them, including Adrienne Thomas.

QUESTION: In your career with the National Archives, you became an archivist in somewhat a belated fashion. Could you discuss how you finally became an archivist, and do you think racial discrimination played a role in holding up your progress in the early days of the Archives?

ANSWER: Jackson felt that racial discrimination had held her up, but proving it was another story. When she went to the Archives, they said that she was qualified to be an archivist as far as education was concerned, but she had not had any experience. By the time she had the experience, she did not have enough education, a master's degree. It was easy to just let her float along - they were getting what they wanted out of her. There were people who said that she would never be reclassified, but she worked on anyway. She thought it must have been embarrassing to the Archives to have her there as an archives technician being recognized as she was in people's books and dissertations, etc., and still nothing was done. After the University of Toledo gave her an honorary degree, that was when something was done. She thought it was somebody with enough nerve to say that she should have it, and let's do it. Jackson said that this was something that was very hard for her to explain to somebody. If she said it was prejudice, others would point out people around her who had come in as archivists, people of her race who had come in and done well. Also, she didn't really have anybody pushing for her from the inside.

QUESTION: Was your case and Jimmy Walker's decided in tandem,

ANSWER: Jackson stated that they were in two different classes altogether. Walker was classified as a specialist. Jackson didn't think he could ever be classified as an ~~Archivist~~. Back in the early days, people with no more training than he had were classified as ~~Archivists~~, but in the present day, the Civil Service Rules say something different.

QUESTION: How has the Archives changed in its position toward women? Mabel Deutrich went very far in the Archives. Was that recently, or were women treated well at the Archives from the very beginning?

ANSWER: Jackson observed that they were only workers. She thought that the highest they ever got was probably a branch chief. But now, you have people like Adrienne Thomas, Mary Wallace, (in planning), and Claudine Weiher (who was Walt Robertson's and John Landers' assistant).

SIDE 2

Jackson suggested it was more productive to concentrate on one's work rather than listen to rumors. She discussed how departures affected morale.

QUESTION: Of your various interests - Southern history, military history, Western history, Afro-American history - how did you get involved in each of your interest areas. What have you done in terms of organizational work in each of your interest areas?

ANSWER: Jackson said that her interest in Southern history and as they call it now, Black history, came with her. Coming from South Carolina, it seemed only natural that it should be a special interest for her. It was easier to work in those areas. Black history, as they call it, was something she grew up with. Her first course was in high school. She grew up with civics in South Carolina. She had one course in college, in South Carolina history, but very little of it since she moved away, but it is a part of her. She was a member of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, but it got to be a little too expensive for her to keep up with. She had been the membership person for the District of Columbia for years for the Southern Historical Association.

Western history came from working at the Archives. Perhaps the movies had something to do with it, too. She found it fascinating and when she started accumulating friends in the West, she found it even easier to grow into it. She thought it still a very open field.

Afro-American history was also very open.

QUESTION: Did you say that Oliver Wendell Holmes had a role in your Western history?

ANSWER: Jackson stated indeed he did, since that was one of his fields. He was the type of man who brought people along and he encouraged her. She noted that this all started when she worked in the military and with other people that she met that turned out to be lifelong friends.

QUESTION: Where does your interest in CAMP (Council on America's Military Past) fit it? Is it part of your Western interest or military interest?

ANSWER: Jackson answered that it was due to her military interest. She stated that you couldn't be interested in the military in this country without being interested in the West also.

QUESTION: Do you hold a position with the CAMP.

ANSWER: Jackson said that she holds a position with the CAMP. She is a life member and a national director and second vice-president.

QUESTION: What are some of the responsibilities as second vice-president? Is it a move-up position to the presidency?

ANSWER: It could be that kind of position, but she didn't think they would do that with her because she didn't feel that she could do that. She had responsibilities with committees and with the board of directors. She was presently working on the by-laws that were just being revised. There were three of them working on them, the president, secretary, and herself. As an officer, she had to be aware of what was good for CAMP, and represent CAMP at hearings and meetings in the Washington area. At that time, Jackson was helping them recruit members.

QUESTION: You mentioned the University of Toledo Ph.D. When did you get that, and what other honors have been bestowed on you?

ANSWER: It was in 1976. She is also a fellow of the company of Military Historians. She was elected to that position in 1967-8. There had been others, but she didn't remember at the time. She noted that she hadn't been elected to an Indian tribe yet.

QUESTION: Do you know if you have any Indian heritage other than a great interest in the West?

ANSWER: Yes, she said that she did have some. Her real mother's people came from down in what Jackson guessed was Florence County along the Pee Dee River. It was obvious from some of the pictures of the older ones that the Indian heritage is there -cheekbones, hair. She stated that in groups like hers, people intermarried and never talked about it. It never occurred to them to say that their grandfather was an Indian. But she never knew her grandmother, she just had a picture of her. She was the one who looked like a real Indian.

QUESTION: How did you happen to get to know the Ellis family out west?

ANSWER: Richard Ellis was in school at the University of Colorado in Boulder. In the 1940's Jackson had met his advisor Robert Athbarn who told Ellis that if he ever went to the Archives, he should look up Sara Jackson. She continued the same kind of relationship that she had with Dr. Athbarn. Ellis wasn't the only one of his students that came, but he and Jackson seemed to hit it off. Ellis would always come to see her. When they moved to Albuquerque they invited her to come visit and she did. She had visited them in Long Island when they lived there, and met his wife, and when David was born, she found it even easier to go out each year to Albuquerque to visit. When Sara, who was named in her honor, was born, it was even easier to visit.

In conclusion, Jackson said that while she may not have got a top salary, some of the joy and pleasure that go along with working at the Archives -the fringe benefits -were that many of her close friends were the researchers and their students. She knew as many people in Western history as she did in Southern history. And, though she hated to admit it, more so than she knew in Afro-American history.

QUESTION: Are there any last words that you'd like to add to this tape?

ANSWER: She recommended that if the interviewer were going to do a series of these tapes, that he interview a few other people, some who have been at the Archives a long time, like Kathryn M. Murphy, Mr. Marion M. Johnson, with the Justice Department records, who dealt with restricted records such as the Warren Commission, Watergate, etc.. One who hadn't been at the Archives quite as long, but who has had experience along with some of the same people as herself was Robert Kyasnicka, and maybe even Lillian Grady who moved from the Office of the Archives to the Education Division, who was responsible for so much of the exhibit work.