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Oral History with Maxine Turner

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Biography

Maxine Turner was born in 1940 in Holt, Alabama, and moved to Meridian, Mississippi when she was three years-old. After living in the George Reese Courts, Turner’s family moved to 34th Avenue and 13th Street in the northwest part of town. They attended St. Paul Methodist Episcopal Church, just across the street from the 13th Street library.

Turner began using the library when she was in third grade, mostly for personal reading and to support her schooling. She attended several of Meridian’s segregated schools, including St. Joseph Catholic School, Meridian Baptist Seminary, Wechsler Junior High School and T.J. Harris High School, and was also involved in Girl Scouts. She later attended Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi, and completed a master’s degree at Mississippi State in Starkville. After returning to Meridian in 1969, she moved to New York in 1971 to pursue a career in music education.

Transcript

Griffis: This is Dr. Matthew Griffis of the University of Southern Mississippi interviewing Maxine Turner on January 12th, 2017. This is an oral history interview for the Roots of Community project. I’m in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in my office at the University; Ms. Turner is in Bay Shore, NY. And due to the distance we are, of course, conducting this interview over the phone.

Ms. Turner will be discussing her recollections of growing up in Meridian, Mississippi, and more specifically, her recollections of using the 13th Street library—or, the “black library,” as some called it then—which was a segregated library built with Carnegie funds, opened in 1913 and permanently closed in 1974. So, thanks once again, Ms. Turner, for donating this interview to and participating in the project.
Turner: Oh, you're welcome.

Griffis: So, for how long did you live in Meridian?

Turner: Oh, well I lived in Meridian most of my life. I left Meridian in 1971 and came to New York. So, I was there until 1971.

Griffis: And you were born there?

Turner: No, no. I was born in Holt, Alabama.

Griffis: Okay.

Turner: But I moved to Meridian when I was three years old.

Griffis: And so, I assume you attended school in Meridian?

Turner: Yes, I did.

Griffis: And what levels of school? Elementary and secondary as well?

Turner: Yes, I did.

Griffis: Okay. And which schools did you attend in Meridian?

Turner: I attended the Meridian Baptist Seminary. I went to kindergarten also at St. Joseph Catholic School, Meridian Baptist Seminary, Wechsler Junior High, and T.J. Harris High School.

Griffis: What do you remember about Meridian, at that time, as a place to live?

Turner: Well, it was a segregated city but we were exposed to quite a bit of culture. Being in the South and being black, we were exposed to quite a bit, especially those years at Wechsler Junior High School. We were exposed to classical recitals; some of us were exposed to tap and ballet that was brought to the black schools. Many of us took voice and piano from Mrs. Clara Thompson and Mrs. Maggie Sweetner, who were music teachers in the city. And quite a bit of culture, in spite of the fact that we were in Mississippi and in a segregated environment. We were exposed to quite a bit of culture.

Griffis: Where in Meridian did you live at the time you were there?

Turner: I lived in the George Reese Courts, which were projects. And I later moved to 34th Avenue and 13th Street, which was on the—I guess you would call that the north part of town, northwest part of town.

Griffis: Would you say the area of town you lived in was known as a part of town where a lot of African Americans lived?


Griffis: How did the African American community fit in with the larger white community? Were there separate businesses?
Turner: Oh, yes. Everything was separate. Yes.

Griffis: And of course there was, from 1913 onward, a separate library.

Turner: Yes.

Griffis: And it sounds to me like at one time you were living close to it, if you were on 34th and 13th Street.

Turner: Right.

Griffis: At what age did you begin using the 13th Street library?

Turner: Oh, I would say when I was probably in the 3rd or 4th grade, in the summer. I utilized it more in the summer because my mother always had a little reading list for me, and so I would go to the library. And of course, Mrs. Mathis would assist me in books that I should be reading, and on what level, yes.

Griffis: And that reading list that your mother had—was that her idea? What kind of books were on that list?

Turner: Wow... I really don't remember those books. My mother taught English in the junior high school. And in the summers, she worked. So, I would go to the library and spend a few hours there, a few days a week. And from the reading list that my mother left for me. That's what I would do during the summers.

Griffis: What can you recall about the library’s books and collections? Were there other reasons you went there to find books?

Turner: Well, yes. When I got to junior high school, of course, we went to the library there to do research—although it wasn’t, I don’t believe it was called “research” at the time, for us in the middle school and the junior high school. But we went to the library, you know, to do research. We also went to the library for Mrs. Mathis used to have little programs, little reading programs for us, you know—“story time”, I believe it's called, yes. She would have story time for us, and, you know, she would read stories to us and then ask us questions about it, and how we could relate to it and that type thing.

Griffis: Can you recall at all what some of those books were?

Turner: Oh, I’m so sorry. I certainly cannot at this time. No, I can’t, no.

Griffis: That’s okay. Do you have any recollection of what, generally speaking, your favorite books were to read? You certainly had what your mother put on the list every summer. But if it was up to you to choose things, what might you choose?

Turner: Oh, I’m sure I would have chosen books on travel—because I was interested in travel in the United States; books that were on music, because I sang at a very young age. And so, I’m sure it was travel and music.
Griffis: You mentioned before attending story time—when Mrs. Mathis would do story time. Were there any other programs like that, that you remember participating in?

Turner: Well, yes. There were programs in Wechsler Junior High School, where they had reading programs—story time, in Wechsler Junior High School, where Ms. Crump was the principal. And she tried very hard to expose us to as much as possible. So, we had story time in Wechsler Junior High School. And I started there, like I said—oh, well no, the second grade. Second grade I went to Wechsler Junior High School, yes.

Griffis: And at the library, were there any other programs that you attended or participated in? At the 13th Street library?

Turner: At the public library? No, I don't believe so. I can't remember that far back, but I don't think so.

Griffis: What can you recall, if anything, about the other library users, going to the library? Was it a well-used library? Did you find yourself most of the time… Well, was it usually empty, or…?

Turner: Oh, no. No. It was a well-used library. Because Mrs. Mathis… I would think that she probably worked with the school district, but we were not aware of this. She exposed us to quite a bit. And then, of course, the research that was required of us from the school, of course, we had to do it there at the public library. So, it was well utilized.

Griffis: Was there a library at—I assume there would have been a library at the junior high school?

Turner: Yes, there was a library at Wechsler Junior High School.

Griffis: How did the two libraries compare at all?

Turner: Well, of course the public library had more to offer. But I would say the fact that Wechsler was a junior high school—a black junior high school—I think it was probably very well equipped for a black school during that time.

Griffis: Do you remember, or can you recall, the public library’s hours? Can you remember when it opened and when it closed? Was it open in the evenings, weekends?

Turner: Yes, it was open during the evenings. I can’t remember the time, but it was open during the evenings. Of that, I’m sure.

Griffis: You mentioned Mrs. Mathis before.

Turner: Yes.

Griffis: Another person that I interviewed about this library mentioned her name. Can you recall any other library staff there, even if not by name? Or was it just Mrs. Mathis?
Turner: All I remember is Mrs. Mathis, yes. I don’t remember anybody else.

Griffis: Was she there the entire time that you were a library user?

Turner: Yes, yes.

Griffis: What can you remember about the way the library looked? I’m sure you remember the exterior. But when you walked in, what did it look like on the inside?

Turner: Well, it was a room full of books from top to bottom. There were books on tables, where she [Mrs. Mathis] had displays set up. She always had little reading centers, you know. Maybe she would have… If it was December, she’d have a reading section on Christmas; or if it was books for the summer, summer reading. She’d have a set up there. She had different little set-ups. And of course, there were all of the books for the new decimal system, I guess it was called at the time. But she always had different little sections in the library for special things, special holidays or special events.

Griffis: So there were areas for displays and there were many books.

Turner: Yes.

Griffis: What about study tables?

Turner: Yes, yes.

Griffis: Was there a basement? I’m looking at an image of the library now, and...

Turner: Yes, there was a basement. But I don’t ever recall going down there.

Griffis: Okay. It was probably unfinished.

Turner: Probably.

Griffis: It is not typical for buildings down here in the South to have basements.

Turner: Yes.

Griffis: Now, when I asked earlier about how busy it was when you were there: Can you remember anything specifically or generally about the other users that were there? Obviously, they were all African American like yourself...

Turner: Yes.

Griffis: Was it mainly children when you were there? Or do you remember any adults there too?

Turner: I can remember... I don’t remember adults being there. But I remember children being there all the time.

Griffis: Did you ever see a member of the white community inside the library?

Turner: No, no.
Griffis: Did you, for any reason, find yourself at the main library, which was downtown?

Turner: At the white library?

Griffis: Yes. Did you try using it any time?

Turner: Oh, no. No.

Griffis: How did you know that you weren’t allowed to use that library?

Turner: Because you grew up in segregation. So, there were just certain things that you knew that you did not, you know... You had your things that you could participate in, or you were involved in. And whites had theirs. So, it was not a, you know... It was not a question. It was just automatic.

Griffis: Just an assumption.

Turner: Yes.

Griffis: Was there ever a time that you were using the library, and something you were looking for they didn’t have?

Turner: No. If something like that occurred, Mrs. Mathis made it her business to get what you needed the next time you came to the library.

Griffis: Do any particular memories... I mean, you’ve already shared quite a few of your recollections with me already. But do you have any memories that come to mind more prominently than others?

Turner: Well, I just knew that it was a place, you know, that I could go and read about travel and explore music books. And the things that I was interested in, of course, were with music at a young age. And just, you know, reading about things that were going on in the world. And of course, at a very young age, I enjoyed looking at the pictures of other cities, you know. But I was just... I guess I was just a typical kid going to the library, you know? And Mrs. Mathis always made everything very interesting, you know? She had a very special talent at drawing you in. Even when she read a story, you were just fascinated with her reading a story to you.

Griffis: You said that you remember the library being quite busy—quite well-used, the times that you were there. Was the library something that people spoke about outside the library? Did parents, teachers, you with your friends—did the subject ever come up? Or, was the library kind of, like—everyone just knew it was there?

Turner: Yes, I think everybody knew it was there. Because when we left in the summer, if we were at vacation bible school at St. Paul United Methodist Church—well, it was St. Paul Methodist Episcopal Church at the time, that was across the street from the library—very often, when we left vacation bible school in the summer, we’d go to the library because Ms. Mathis always had something interesting for us to read, or something for us to do after leaving.
vacation bible school from across the street. And sometimes our vacation bible school teachers would give us an assignment to read at the library, and then when we came back the following day we’d have to tell our vacation bible school teachers what it is that we read, and maybe answer a couple of questions. Yes.

Griffis: I’m thinking now about the—and not to change the subject too abruptly—but did you and your family attend church?

Turner: Yes. We attended St. Paul Methodist Episcopal Church, which was across the street from the library.

Griffis: And what other places in town do you remember were places that you liked to go?

Turner: Well, on Saturdays, after shopping, my mom would take me to Jones’ Supply, which was a black-owned—I guess you would call it restaurant—where you could get the hamburgers and the ice cream sodas. That was a treat on Saturday, after shopping, maybe, or going to a movie. That was your treat, to go there, to the business Jones’ Supply and have a hamburger and an ice cream soda. And of course, that was a black-owned establishment.

Griffis: A lot of these places being places where people would go… We may not describe them as “meeting places,” but in my mind I think of them as meeting places. Can you think of any other meeting places for African Americans at that time in Meridian?

Turner: Well, let’s see. Now, St. Paul Church had activities in the summer. We had, of course, vacation bible school, and we had the Girl Scouts at St. Paul—the meeting place was St. Paul Church.

Griffis: And you were involved in Girl Scouts?

Turner: Oh, yes. Yes.

Griffis: Was that integrated or segregated?

Turner: Oh, it was segregated. Everything was segregated.

Griffis: Oh, wow. You see, I wasn’t even aware that there was a black-only Girl Scouts.

Turner: Oh, yes. We were segregated, yes. I started off as a Brownie and then became, you know, moved up to a Girl Scout.

Griffis: You mentioned that you stopped using the library in the early 70s because you left Meridian at that point—or, I’m assuming you stopped using the library at the same time you left Meridian…. Is that true?

Turner: Oh yes, I had. Before I left Meridian in ’71, I was living in Jackson, Mississippi, because I was teaching in Morton, Mississippi. And so, I was not living in Meridian. I lived in Morton, Mississippi, and then I came back to Meridian in ’69 and stayed there until ’71. And then I moved to New York.
Griffis: And so—I’m just making notes as we go, in my margin of my pad here... So, if you were teaching—you attended college, then?

Turner: Oh, yes. Yes.

Griffis: That was in Jackson?

Turner: I attended Tougaloo College.

Griffis: And how many years was that program?

Turner: At Tougaloo? Four years.

Griffis: And then you came back to Meridian. After you left in 1971—you’ve mentioned coming back recently—but did you ever return to Meridian, after that?

Turner: Oh certainly, I visited there. My mother was still there while she was alive. Yes, I visited frequently. I went back in the summers because I got my masters from Mississippi State in Starkville, Mississippi.

Griffis: And your masters was also in education?

Turner: Yes, music.

Griffis: Oh, wow. Good for you. When you would return during the summers, or at any other point that you returned to Meridian, did you ever visit the library again?

Turner: No, no.

Griffis: When it closed in 1974, was that... Well, maybe I should phrase this question differently: At what point did you learn the library had closed? When was that? Or, do you recall when that was at all?

Turner: No, I do not. I do not recall when that was.

Griffis: Okay. Well, that's all the questions I have on my page here. Was there anything that I haven't asked that you were hoping I'd ask? Or anything else that you wanted to share with us?

Turner: Well, no. I cannot think of anything. I can say I told you that I went home this summer because St. Paul’s was celebrating its 150th anniversary. So, I was there for a part of that celebration—St. Paul United Methodist Church. But I cannot think of anything that I'd like to add, other than the fact that I feel very fortunate to have been raised in Meridian, because we were exposed to a great deal as black children that others were not in other cities in Mississippi.

Griffis: And specifically, how so?

Turner: Well, the concerts—I had the opportunity to see and hear Leontyne Price, because she was of the same faith, United Methodist. And there were many concerts that were given in Meridian, that they brought to Meridian, that we were exposed to. And of course, I told you we had tap and ballet. We were
exposed to that, although it was segregated. The dance teacher came to our Wechsler Junior High School to give us those lessons, but at least we were exposed to them. And of course, my mom carried me to Tougaloo College very often to concerts and that type thing at Tougaloo, yes.

Griffis: One last thing that just entered my mind: If you came back from Jackson in 1969 and then lived there [in Meridian] until ’71, by then the old, white-only library that was downtown—the really large one—it would have been closed by then, and the building that’s currently the public library building, just up the road, would have just been opened.

Turner: Opened, yes.

Griffis: And do you remember using that library at all?

Turner: No, I did not. I don’t think so. No, I did not.

Griffis: Okay. Once again, I’d like to thank you, Mrs. Turner, for your time and your recollections of growing up in Meridian and using the 13th Street library at that time. And thank you for donating this interview to the Roots of Community project.

Turner: Oh, you’re welcome.