Oral History with Dr. Thomas Duval  
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Interviewers: Nikki Atkinson, Gerald Butler, and Bobbie Padgett 

Duvall: For the most part our history is not in the books. My thesis is basically this is the problems we have with minority students because our history is not in the books and we don’t have a generation that is passing our history on to our kids because, unfortunately, there is a lot of dysfunction in America today. So these are some of the sources that I have come across that are relevant to Macon. This is an excellent book here, it doesn’t go back to slavery but it gives a real good history of relatively recent things. This book right here has a lot to do with what I’m gonna talk about, *Faithful, Firm and True*. That book is very relevant to Ballard-Hudson.

I’m just going to start with a little bit about myself. I was born in Macon, GA in 1947. I attended St. Peter Claver School. This is a Catholic school located in the Pleasant Hill community. When I retired, one of the things that really got me sort of interested in this history project was the history of Pleasant Hill. Originally, that’s what I wanted to look into. Pleasant Hill is one of the oldest continuing African American communities in the U.S. It is in the National Historic Records, I think. St. Peter Claver is there and also the Elementary school I went to was located there. The interesting thing about that neighborhood was that Ballard Normal School was located there also. It closed in the 40’s. And that’s the school where my father finished and most of the African American leadership came out of that school.

I went to Ballard Hudson. This is the yearbook here. And I finished high school in 1965. I went there all but one year. I went to Boggs Academy down in Keysville, Georgia. Boggs Academy was a Presbyterian missionary school. My experience there was very similar to Ballard Normal in that you had missionary teachers there. These missionary teachers were very much interested in the students and they had what I called a missionary spirit.

I went to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. I was looking for something. I wasn’t sure what it was, but I was just looking. So I went to Lincoln University my first year, and then I went to a school they had recommended down in Boggs Marietta, and then I transferred to Howard University. And that’s where I got my degree. The interesting thing about me is, I came along during the Vietnam War. To this day I don’t really know what that war was about. I really don’t know why we lost that many folks in that war. When I originally went off to school, I thought I wanted to be an engineer, but as the war progressed they got to a point where they were changing the regulations. So I began to look at other opportunities. I began to look at the health sciences. So I graduated with a BA in economics with minors in business, chemistry and biology. I went to dental school at Howard University, and I got my masters in Public Health.
Administration from Johns Hopkins School of Public Health in Baltimore. I did residency in general dentistry in the D.C. area, St. Elizabeth’s Hospital. I worked in a community health center. I worked about 14 years in the prison system. I spent about four or five years part time in a youth development center system in Georgia and I spent about 25 years in public health. I retired as Georgia’s first African American State Dental Director. So that’s my background.

I grew up in the segregated south. I remember standing in front of St. Peter Claver in the morning saying the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, and when we got to the part about liberty and justice for all, I knew that wasn’t true. The reason why I stayed on track, in terms of my education, was because my parents were going to beat my behind if I didn’t. But I knew there was something wrong with our system even back in those days.

Just a little bit more about me, when I retired my wife wanted this big house, this is my second marriage. I have a son; he’s in graduate school at Clark Atlanta University. He is in psychosocial counseling. I took a job, and I was going down to south Georgia, and on the way back I kept having these premonitions “you need to look into the history, you need to look into the history,” and I didn’t know why. Turns out, I did begin to look into my history, and I found out that my family was from Baker County, which is right next door to where I was, in Calhoun County, which is in the middle of nowhere. My family is from a plantation down in Baker County in south Georgia. I began to study that, and I found out all these folks that I never knew about, and I traced my family back to Macon and a whole lot of other things I didn’t know about. The greatest thing I found out when I really began to look at my family was a story that I would recommend you all look into if you ever have the opportunity to do some research, and that is the American Missionary Association story. That story I don’t think has ever really been told to students at the degree that it should be told.

The American Missionary Association came out of a subset of Congregationalist ministers who were abolitionists. The history that I learned about was always in regards to abolitionists, but I never knew about the American Missionary Association. These folks put themselves on the line, in terms of getting out there way ahead of their time, and they were a part of the Underground Railroad. They were facilitating runaway slaves all the way up to Canada before the Civil War; they were part of the Haitian Slave ship. So they were well ahead of their time. The interesting thing about them though was during the Civil War, the saviors of the slaves really turned out to be the Congregationalist Generals, not Abraham Lincoln. They were abolitionists and they made policy as they conquered territory during the Civil War. I went to a summer program called Hampton Institute in Virginia. I did what they call a pre-college program up there. It turns out that Benjamin Butler, the slaves would run away and run up to the Union lines, and when they ran up to these lines, the General had a dilemma. What do you do with them? Do you send the slaves back to help the confederates win the war? Or what do you do with them? So the decision was made in the field to accept them as contraband of war. So that town began as contraband town, and eventually it was a
Congregationalist minister, Reverend Lockwood, that was allowed to come down there and start a school by a teacher who was secretly teaching slaves because it was illegal to teach slaves. The teacher’s name was Mary and that’s how Hampton Institute began. So unknown to me at the time, that was the history of that Institution.

Back to me, when I got out of school my goal was to get out of the South. I began to change a little bit around my senior year, but all through high school most of us who were really trying to do something with our lives, we were thinking the North was wonderful. We thought we were gonna get out of school, and we were gonna head north. I got to visit my grandparents in Dayton, Ohio. So I got my first experience with integration and got to go places that I didn’t get to go in Macon and so forth. My folks were in a business that lasted well over 100 years. We were in the upholstering business. So I had a lot of experience that a lot of my friends didn’t have because we got to see the other side of life so to speak and we got to go into other folk’s houses. So I knew that there was a whole lot more to the world than living there in Pleasant Hill.

Most of the kids at Ballard-Hudson at the time were going to be baseball players and football players, just like today, and that was their aspiration. Things in those days were a lot different in those days in terms of discipline. The discipline problems that you hear of today, well, we didn’t have a lot of them then because at an African American school if you misbehaved the principal—who was brought here to combine Ballard Normal and Hudson High together into a new public school, his name was Mr. R.J. Martin—if you misbehaved, you would just be expelled. That was pretty much the end of it. All these layers and layer of rights of the students we didn’t really have all that.

Getting back to Ballard Normal, it was on Forest Avenue in Pleasant Hill. One of the things I think I could defend is per square foot out of Pleasant Hill there were more educated African Americans than virtually any place else in the U.S.—PER SQUARE FOOT. It was a small community, but because it had this school, it was producing leaders for the whole country. These folks went out and did marvelous things all over the country. They had about 4 big reunions over the years, and they came back to Macon, and now most of them are dying. The interesting thing about how Ballard got started was this, it was basically retired generals from the Civil War that got jobs with the Freedman’s Bureau. This school started as Lewis High, and it was downtown where the emergency room now is. It is named after General John Lewis, and not only was he a General, he was also a dentist. He had gotten his arm blown off in the Civil War. He was working with the American Missionary Association and the Freedman’s Bureau. The schools in Macon actually began in the basement of churches. It is inspiring to see just how much these children wanted an education right after slavery. You would not only have children in the school, you would have adults in there too. So then they kind of divided it up and made the evening for the adults, but along the way many of the time you had adults and kids in the same room.
Lewis High was actually set on fire two times. The second time it was actually burned down to the ground. Depending on what you read, some say they weren’t really trying to put the fire out. I have called down to the Lanier Building, and they have a picture painted of the school when it was actually burning down. It was rebuilt, and then in about 1889—keep in mind this is during reconstruction. During this time you had missionaries coming to the South. Not only did they come to the South to teach these kids, but they actually lived in these communities. These were white missionary teachers that were coming to the South that had been devastated by war, and they were living in the black communities. The things they had to put up with to do that are just unbelievable. They did all of that because of their religious belief, they were inspired by God to do it, and they did it.

Around 1889 the school name was changed. There was a man named Ballard who was a philanthropist, also made a lot of money in the belting industry. He distributed leather belts that were used for steam engines, and he made a major contribution to the school. So with the permission of General Lewis, it was named after him. And that is how it became Ballard Normal school. Normal comes from Norms. For all the education in the period to be able to teach in the elementary school and some high schools in Macon, the idea was that you could teach Norms. There was a transition there were you could go like two extra years and you could teach. The goal of these missionaries at Ballard Normal was to turn out a lot of African American teachers, and this is where we have gotten most of our initial African American teachers is from these missionaries. Keep in mind Macon, Georgia, was not the only place this was happening, this was happening all over the South.

The American Missionary Association founded most of the historically black universities and colleges. One of the greatest alums from the school was William Scarborough. During their day, nobody believed a black man could learn Greek or Latin. He was the first black to learn these. When Macon surrendered to the Union General during the Civil War, he was sitting up in a tree, and he watched them come into Macon. He had been taught by a white family in Macon to read and write. It was illegal, you could actually be whipped or fined, if you taught blacks how to read and write at that time. His story is very inspiring; he went from being a slave to being the president of a college in Ohio. He shared something with Frederick Douglas because he married a white teacher that had taught at Lewis High.

One of the biggest things I learned, it was actually Mr. Hofford that gave me a better African American education. He was a Quaker; he was from Quaker Town, Pennsylvania. He came down when I was over at Boggs, and he taught me black history or Negro history as we called it then. He gave me the best education I probably ever had. One of the biggest issues that there was around education, was this idea that education for African Americans should be industrial and not the traditional liberal arts. The Atlanta Compromise is one of the lasting things we still debate about to this day. Booker T. Washington founded Tuskegee Institute, and what he was able to do, was to get
northern philanthropist to fund the founding of the school and to help make it a great institution. What he basically said at a convention in Atlanta was that it was more important for blacks to learn a trade, than it was to be able to buy a ticket to go see a play. So there was a big debate between W. E. B Du Bois and Booker T. Washington as to which way we should go. This school stumbled on the right path way back then and we have gotten away from it, and it is simply you need both. They had a shop class at Ballard Normal, but they were also teaching Latin, algebra, geometry etc. So they had both. If you want boys to learn, boys have to touch it, feel it, see it and do it. And if you want boys to keep their attention on track, shop is an excellent tool. When I came along shop was a place for dummies, and to this day that is what we think of it.

Today we have split our education where industrial education is frowned on. The truth of the matter is if you integrate shop with math and science, you turn out a student that is well rounded and can perform. Shop, if you played with things like that, it will help you. I’m not saying you can’t do it without it, but it will help. Same thing with math, if you have touched a triangle or built a pyramid it helps. These folks had it right back then, and I think we need to go back to it. In education today we seem to look down on vocational education, but those things you can make a living at require the same skills that you’re gonna get in a basic college education. So I don’t agree with the whole concept of pulling shop out, because I think it was a great thing for the boys. The girls did the home economics part, sewing foods and nutrition. The school wasn’t free you had to pay to go. My cousin Harold Perdue, he is a retired principal, he went to this school. His job was down in the basement of the building was working with the furnace, and he is proud of that.

To get back to the other point, this is the beginning of education in Macon and Middle Georgia. What happened was there was the Rosenwald fund and there was a Slater foundation. Between those two, they got this money for a lot of industrial education. Ballard took the money and used it for both and from what I can tell you, I think at one time they had the best education in the U.S. I think I could make the case that this school over in Pleasant Hill was one of the best, if not the best black schools in the entire U.S. at one time.

Now Hudson High. One of the people that I found out could tell me who Hudson was has recently died. A lot of these people are gone. That is why I am going around recording these people, and I am hopefully going to make some documentaries. I want to go in and talk to African American boys. We are losing African American boys by the fourth grade. If we don’t have the motivation of these kids by the fourth grade they are basically lost. Last I heard they were supposed to be dropping the CRCT Exam. When our kids can’t perform or something we just assume there is something wrong with the exam. That is not the solution. Schools in Georgia need to improve. Getting back to the situation at Hudson, I think Hudson was an educator, and the school was located on Monroe Street. The Booker T. Washington Center was originally Hudson High. It is interesting to find out that this school came about in 1922 and was the first school for
Negros included in the public school system. Until 1922 there was no public supported high school for African Americans in Macon, Georgia. Ballard was around, but like I said people had to pay and there was a whole lot that had to be done to keep it funded. To me that is a terrible shame. We should have been funding African American education all along. My point is in a lot of ways we are still fighting the Civil War, but in a lot of ways the masses of folks in Georgia should be glad the Union won because the idea of public schools for the masses was a northern concept. The idea of free schools really came about after the Civil War. The interesting thing about Hudson was even then, it went up to the 11th grade and not up to the 12th grade for a long time. Some folks after the 11th grade at Hudson went to college but some transferred over to Ballard Normal to get that last year in.

Howard University is named after General Oliver Otis Howard. He was a general in the Civil War and he was in charge on the Freedman’s Bureau. He helped found the university, and it was the American Missionary Association that founded the theology school and the Freedman’s Bureau provided the funds.

But it was still an annual appropriations for Congress when I was there, and that’s another whole story. I won’t go off into that one. But bringing it on home, I didn’t know this until about a couple of months ago. Sherman came through Georgia, and I know southerners to this day hate Sherman. A lot of things have happened that were terrible and unnecessary and so forth, even to a foreign eye I would put that. Well, General Howard when he came to Georgia, Sherman divided his troops into two divisions. General Howard was the right wing of Sherman’s army. And I think the right wing actually came through here, Griswoldville and so forth. And Sherman’s army stopped and hunkered down in Milledgeville. I think they had something like 30 thousand troops down in Milledgeville. But anyway, it was interesting that the school I went to was named after General Howard, and he actually came through here during the Civil War.

So anyways, as I looked at a lot of these things over the years, you know I’ve had experiences that I didn’t really know I had. And I went to Lincoln. Lincoln was really the terminal line of the underground railroad. And of course I went to Howard. And then many of the teachers that were still teaching college and so forth were also teachers from the American Missionary Association in Hampton. So, my experience with Ballard-Hudson was basically a good experience. The biggest difference that I noticed from Ballard-Hudson, was that I went from a situation where probably about 10% of the kids were going to go to college. Then I went down to Boggs where about 90% of the kids were going to go to college. It was a much smaller school, but they were college bound, and I chose to do that my senior year. Even now I go to reunions, and folks ask me, ‘Why did you go to Boggs, what was that all about?’ Well, I thought my playing field needed to be elevated a little bit, because I was going off to school. Cause my brother had gone off to school, and he had not done well. He was not motivated in college. And so, I had enough common sense to talk to my grandmother, who convinced my father to let me go. And that’s what I did.
The good thing about the South and what changed me was simply that, when I was young my plans were to get out of Georgia, but Georgia changed. And so now you know we have Obama and he talks about change. My generation saw a lot of change, a whole lot of change. Segregated water fountains. This book right here, I was hoping my friend George, he’s a retired OB/GYN. When we would travel, you know there was no place for us to stop and so forth, and George’s sister’s ex husband wrote this book. It’s called, ‘The Green Book.’ And this was a book that was available, made available at Esso stations where black folks could get this book, and if you were in town you could find someplace to stay. Because it was a terrible situation when you were traveling. If we’d go to Dayton, we didn’t make certain cities and certain times, there was no place for us to stay. And I guess my dad didn’t know about that green book, but that’s a good little story and so forth. But the South changed and what I think is the missing link with our kids is that, African American students have to know their history so that they can appreciate what they have in terms of a basic good public education. They have to know that history, so they develop good self esteem. If they don’t, they won’t have a moral and ethical conscience. And what I’ve seen in the prison system and at the YDC, are a group of kids that don’t have a moral and ethical conscience, and so the real thing is, I have books here that I can show you.

I have a whole little notebook of all the statistics about what’s wrong. What I’ve been trying to concentrate on is to come up with public solutions to the problem. There’s two fundamental things that have to happen if we’re going to change this thing around. There has to be accountability for bad behavior and African Americans have to demand it. And secondly, the kids have to know their history. And you have to start giving the boys—and I’m picking on the boys because we’ve got so many of them that are ending up at the YDC and prison—the boys have to know the truth about their history at a very young age. One of the biggest flaws in that CRCT thing was that the history, the way that thing was divided the first four years, the first part is up until 1860. That’s how 1-4 is just the history of up until 1860. This isn’t cocktail chitchat. That whole period African Americans were slaves. You’re not telling the whole story. There needs to be real discussion around what’s going on or what the promise of the Constitution was, and what the reality of it was from the very beginning. And that’s not just for black kids, but for white, it’s for everybody. And when you divide that thing up and it starts off 1-4 up until 1860, to me that is a terrible, terrible flaw. Because you’re not telling the whole story about the country. Article 1 Section 2 Paragraph 3 in the original Constitution, declared African Americans as slaves, and as 3/5 of a man for appropriations and so forth. That needs to be talked about very early on, so you don’t turn out people with illusions and delusions about our country being first of all democratic, which we’re not. We’re a republic form of government. But we don’t even get into the initial flaw.

Now those things sort of been changed over time, but we really need to discuss those at I think an early age so that everybody can come together in terms of our history. And I think that if we can get our history along with a whole host of other things that people
are recommending, we can change things around. Because not only will we be helping
the kids, but I’m just going to be blunt, mom’s a crackhead, dad’s a crackhead, those
kids would actually be educating some of their parents. The ones that are able to
change their lives and look at their situation. Because they don’t know their history
either, and as a professional person, you have an obligation, I have an obligation to pass
the history on. And if we don’t do it, who’s going to do it? Because if it’s all about
getting stuff for African Americans, I’m guilty, as are most of my friends, is the
acquisition of stuff that we are trying to get. Big house, big cars, big clothes, big
vacations, it just goes on and on and on. And nobody talks about our history. And yet,
we can’t figure out why we’re losing our kids. It can’t just be about stuff. That’s where I
think we’re missing it. So, that’s what I’ve been doing in my retirement, is learning the
history.

And one of the greatest documents that explains what the 60’s should’ve been about
that I experienced and the rest of us experienced was this man right here. He finished
Ballard Normal school. And I didn’t read his stuff until I was 57 years old. John Oliver
Killens came out of Ballard Normal School. You all have probably heard about Malcom X.
Many of the ideas that were attributed to Malcom X, he preceded them with. He has
not gotten the recognition that he should have gotten for the books that he wrote. This
document here, is a pixed document of what we should have been about during the
60’s and so forth. The reason why that I think he didn’t get this credit was simply this. In
many ways, he gave up on the United States. He began to kind of float towards a
communist party and so forth. And when you do that, you sort of get lost in terms of
history and people. But having said that, I highly recommend that you take a look at the
things he wrote, because I think that they were certainly germane to his time and still
germane to our time now. I’m certainly not a socialist, and I am a capitalist and I believe
in freedom of rights and so forth. But I also believe in the concept of balance. And, I
think what we have to do is get the right balance of things. And that’s what I’ve been
trying to do in retirement. And, the rest of my life.

So with that any questions about Ballard-Hudson?

Gerald: If you were to give a ratio of blacks to white people in your community and go to
your school, how would you?

Duval: Give a ratio of black to white people in my community or school? I’m not quite
understanding the question.

Gerald: Okay, you said that you attended Ballard-Hudson.

Duval: Ballard was 100% black. Hudson, I didn’t go to Hudson, but it was 100% black. Let
me think about that. I might be mistaken. I think Ballard-Hudson was 100% black.
Ballard Normal, I’m not sure. Because the American Missionary Association did not
exclude anybody from school. The exclusion would have occurred, because nobody
came there. Boggs Academy where I went, it was 100% black when I went there, too. A lot of folks thought I was white, but I wasn’t of course.

Gerald: How often did students from Ballard interact with the majority of white schools in the area?

Duval: Well, initially you know of high school, I would say very, very little. Mercer University, the truth of the matter was, basically you didn’t walk on Mercer University campus when I started high school. Certainly things, the African that went to the school, I forget exactly who he is.

Gerald: Sam Oni.

Duval: Yeah, what year was that? Was that 65?

Gerald: Yeah, I believe so.

Duval: Did you read his story?

Gerald: No, sir.

Duval: Okay, his issue was, he came out of the Baptist Missionary at first hand. He thought that because he had experienced missionary work in his country when he came, here he would be openly accepted in the school and the church. They did a whole lot of adjusting for the school, but they went to the church and that didn’t go well at all. Because if you would’ve asked somebody around here, they would’ve told you that. But here to sum it up—well, let’s just be blunt because we’re getting old now—Africans are proud of their country and many of them thought that because they weren’t Negros or southern Negros. And so, while you may exclude them from the lunch counter, I’m from Africa, you’re not going to exclude me. Now, I’m not saying him. Some of them thought that. But they had a great enlightenment when they came South in those days.

So, anyways that’s the way it was. Things began to change. Vernon Hits, I got an article downstairs. I don’t know if he went to Willingham or Lanier, but he was the first black guy in the band. Ballard-Hudson had a great band. I mean, we had I say one of the best marching bands in the United States for a high school. And I’m not really exaggerating, I gotta give them credit for that. But, Vernon Hits, he came around the corner and a lot of folks saw the first black guy. A kid in the band. And they cheered and everything, but that was in 1965. So, if your question was, there was not that much going on.

Let me tell you something else about the South, too. I didn’t know that much about it at the time, I wish I had. Georgia like many southern states set up like this, that as a black person or as a negro, if you went into a field that there wasn’t a state supported black school that you could get the degree that you wanted, they would pay you to go
anywhere in the entire United States except Georgia to get that degree. Free. So, if you could pass your standardized tests or whatever and so forth, rather than integrate the schools, they would send you anywhere in the United States. And that went on, I don’t know, I guess about ten or twenty years or so. And many teachers, later learned that were teaching me had actually gotten their education that way. They had went to Columbia or some other school.

Any other questions?

Nikki: Do you know why the school closed eventually? Was it because of that?

Duval: I didn’t research that. If I had time, I would’ve researched it, so I could talk about it. But, basically when integration came along, it was fought, fought, fought, fought. And then, Judge Bootle, who the courthouse is named after now, many consider him a turncoat. So, that’s how Ballard-Hudson ended. It was a compromise in education. And to be quite frank, probably because of there was the idea that whites wouldn’t go to a school that was named from the days of segregation.