



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Helen Atkins

Interview Date: September 19, 2005
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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

DRISCOLL: Here's hoping.

ATKINS: [Laughter] I'm very clumsy in things with my hands. I'm not very good with it.

DRISCOLL: OK, well. I think we're OK now. So, I'd like to start by saying this is an interview with Ms. Helen Atkins.

ATKINS: That's right. A-T...

DRISCOLL: A-T-K-I-N-S

ATKINS: There's A-T, A-D, and A-S

DRISCOLL: Hmmm.

ATKINS: Atkins, Askins and Adkins.

DRISCOLL: [Laughter] Right. And this is taking—and the interviewer is Pat Taffe Driscoll. And we are at the Gentle Steps Assisted Living Home at 6108 63rd Place in Riverdale, Maryland.

ATKINS: Right.

DRISCOLL: And Ms. Atkins has been here for...

ATKINS: I don't know. How long I've been there.

UNIDENTIFIED VOICE: I'd have to check that red form.

DRISCOLL: For four of five months, maybe.

ATKINS: Yeah.

DRISCOLL: But she used to live on Capitol Hill at...

ATKINS: That's right.

DRISCOLL: What was your address there?

ATKINS: Well, I think it was 823 C Street SE.

DRISCOLL: 823 C

ATKINS: C... A-B-C.

DRISCOLL: And when did you come there?

ATKINS: I don't know. When did I come here, do you know? [Directed to unidentified person in the room]

DRISCOLL: No, when did you go to C Street?

ATKINS: Oh.

DRISCOLL: To your home on C Street.

ATKINS: I went to C Street, when I got married in 1935.

DRISCOLL: OK, and when did you come to Washington?

ATKINS: In 1918, when I was nine years old.

DRISCOLL: And how old does that make you now?

ATKINS: I'm 97.

DRISCOLL: 97!

ATKINS: 97, on Valentines Day I will be 98. I'm a valentine. That's a nice birthday.

DRISCOLL: That is a nice birthday. You're lucky to have—and it's an easy one to remember.

ATKINS: I used to get a gang of cards because people would send them cards. And they'd go to get them... And they would say Helen's got a birthday. But one year and then all your friends are dead, they are dead. You don't have, you don't have them.

DRISCOLL: You're the last surviving one of your friends?

ATKINS: Well, we have a club of 12 girls. We started, but now three of us living.

DRISCOLL: What club was that?

ATKINS: It was called the GPT's. And we wouldn't tell what it stood for. And so one husband says: Oh you don't have to tell me what GPT stands for. It stands for got plenty tongue. [Laughter]

DRISCOLL: [laughter] Got plenty tongue! So he didn't need to know.

ATKINS: No he didn't need to know, he said, "I know." And I think the three of us [are] left. Everybody else is dead. When you are in your nineties your friends are mostly dead.

DRISCOLL: Yeah, well I guess it would... As you know the history project is trying to trace what it would be like on Capitol Hill as far back as we can find anybody.

ATKINS: That knows.

DRISCOLL: That remembers.

ATKINS: Well I came on Capitol Hill when I was married, that was 1935. But there may be some people further back than that.

DRISCOLL: Well, that's a good place to start. Where were you before you came to Capitol Hill?

ATKINS: I lived at 1721 T Street, Northwest.

DRISCOLL: Ah hah.

ATKINS: It was an apartment house. Owned by Dr.-somebody-Jones, he lived in it, so he kept it beautifully. He and his wife lived there. They didn't have any children. But he really kept it up nice.

DRISCOLL: And was he nice to you?

ATKINS: He was nice to everybody. Every August you either could have a free month's rent or have something done.

DRISCOLL: Yeah, very caring.

ATKINS: Well, I was living with my mother and father, that time. When I married I left there. And came to Capitol Hill.

DRISCOLL: Would you—you were telling me the story about how your mother and dad met.

ATKINS: Yeah, well. My mother—my father went to Cornell University.

DRISCOLL: Ah hah.

ATKINS: And he met my mother, he said all the boys were crazy after her. He said but I got her. [Laughter]. And then she died when I was seven months old.

DRISCOLL: Ahhhhh.

ATKINS: So he married again, when I was nineteen. And I had... She's dead now, but I had a very lovely stepmother. Her name was Maria. And she was nice as she could be. And just as refined as she could be. Lovely person.

DRISCOLL: And did she enjoy knowing you?

ATKINS: Yeah, she was... We were—my father wrote and told us he had gotten married. We were away in the summer; he had never brought her to the house. So I wrote to her. And she wrote a beautiful letter back. And she said, "I'm not Mrs. Ogle to you I'm your own Maria." That's the kind of person she was.

DRISCOLL: Ah.

ATKINS: She was a lovely person; I got along fine with her. And she loved my father, and he loved her. I never heard them say a mean word to one another.

DRISCOLL: That's a pretty good memory to have.

ATKINS: Yeah, so she was a nice person. My father died at fifty, but she lived to be 92.

DRISCOLL: So you are taking after her?

ATKINS: She lived a long time. But I don't come from... My mother died at 21, my father died at 50. So I don't really come from long lived people. My sister died at 63.

DRISCOLL: Now, how old were you, when you came to the Hill? When you got married?

ATKINS: 27, and I had been teaching school seven years.

DRISCOLL: So got your degree early?

ATKINS: Well, when I went to school, we went to normal school, it was two years. And I went to Howard in the evening, and got a degree.

DRISCOLL: Hmmm.

ATKINS: But then the normal school became a four year college.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: But when I went there it was two years. And so I went to Howard in the evening.

DRISCOLL: Could I interrupt just a minute. [turning up volume on recorder]

ATKINS: Yeah... [short gap in recording] Nice. They are.

DRISCOLL: That really helps. So you went to Howard, then?

ATKINS: In the evening, after work. I taught in the daytime, and went in the evening.

DRISCOLL: And where did you teach, what school?

ATKINS: I, well... several. But most of time I taught at Birney in Anacostia [ed: at 2501 Martin L King Jr. Avenue SE].

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: Most of the time.

DRISCOLL: And that was when you were living back... by then you were living on the Hill or were you still with your folks.

ATKINS: Well, when I started there I lived at 1721 T Street NW. Then I got married and my husband brought me out to Capitol Hill. So that I was nearer to Anacostia.

DRISCOLL: How would you get from T Street to Anacostia?

ATKINS: Well, there were two or three ways. I would come on the Florida Avenue [street] car and then get off at Eighth and K and transfer.

DRISCOLL: Yeah, that would be a good way.

ATKINS: You could go around Connecticut Avenue, but that was the best way I think.

DRISCOLL: So what do you first remember when you first moved into C Street?

ATKINS: Well, my mother-in-law moved across the street from me. And I remember she was very lovely to me. She liked me. She said that her son made the best marriage of all her children. And I liked her.

DRISCOLL: Ah.

ATKINS: So she lived across the street from me.

DRISCOLL: And what was her name?

ATKINS: Her name was Marion Atkins. And they owned three houses on that side. And she said that those three houses belonged to us. She said you all look them over. Pick out the one you want, cause my son doesn't have to wait for me to die to get a house. That's what she said.

DRISCOLL: Wow.

ATKINS: Very nice, she and I got along fine. She liked me. She said her son made the best marriage of all her children. And she and I got along fine. I loved her she was a nice old lady. She couldn't have been

any nicer to me, had she been my mother. She was very nice to me and I tried to be nice to her. Cause I never did believe in... being mad, you know starting off not getting along. I ain't going to like her. I don't like that kind of stuff. So she and I got along fine.

DRISCOLL: Just one minute again. OK I think that will be better. So what kind of work did your husband do then?

ATKINS: My husband was a real estate broker during the day, but he worked at the post office at night.

DRISCOLL: So he worked two jobs, to keep going.

ATKINS: He did... yeah he did. He worked two jobs.

DRISCOLL: And you were still teaching?

ATKINS: I was still teaching. I taught till I retired.

DRISCOLL: And how old were you when you retired?

ATKINS: Ahh... I think I was 59.

DRISCOLL: Wow, that's forty some years of teaching.

ATKINS: Thirty some years. I would have. Ah... well if you stay till you're 62 or 65 you get more pension. But I came out when I was 59. So have less pension. But I had been there long enough. You know I went to the normal school for two years and then I taught. So... I didn't. You know, and I taught school 37 years. That's long enough.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh. What changes did you notice in the kids through the years?

ATKINS: Freshness! They got everybody's number. The mothers and everybody's number the children got.

DRISCOLL: And that made teaching...

ATKINS: A little boy had been cutting up one day and he said—he knew he had been bad and he said: Ah... "You going to let my mother know about it, she ain't going to do nothing."

DRISCOLL: Wow.

ATKINS: You know, children as the years went, they thought they knew everything. You know they weren't as respectful as they used to be. I didn't dare do nothing in school. Not because of the teaching,

because of my home. You went out every morning and they told you to do their work, mind your teaching. You better not get no word that you gave any trouble. That didn't go in those days. Didn't get nothing. One day the teacher told me to wait after school. She walked—my father, I almost wet in my pants.

DRISCOLL: [Laughter]

ATKINS: She said, “Helen I'm going to skip you, and I've tried to let your father know.”

DRISCOLL: [Laughter]

ATKINS: I was sure glad to hear that. [Laughter] Didn't get no bad word home. I think children behaved because of home, in school. Not because of the school. Because the last word you heard was do your work and mind your teacher. And would not tolerate any bad news coming home.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: Never occurred to me to not do what I was supposed to do.

DRISCOLL: So you were a good student then?

ATKINS: I was OK. I wasn't the valedictorian. But I did well.

DRISCOLL: Sounds like you enjoyed it too.

ATKINS: I liked to study.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: I still like to study. I used to study. The English teacher went around one time and asked us how long we did on our lessons. And I don't remember what I said but whatever I said, everybody burst out laughing. And she said, “You need not laugh. Her work shows us she does study.” I had my father—we had to get your lessons. If you told him you didn't have any, you know what he says was, go up to your room and study what you had in school today. You couldn't say I had no lessons tonight, Daddy. That didn't go. Get your lessons.

DRISCOLL: Hmm.

ATKINS: And one time my sisters and I were taking the same thing and he bought a book... you had to buy your books. He bought her a book and me a book. And my family called me “I read”—that's my

middle name. “Mary here’s your book, and “I read’ here’s yours. Now don’t say you couldn’t your lessons, cause your sister has the book.”

DRISCOLL: [Laughter] So, he was thinking ahead of you.

ATKINS: Yeah. Ahead of you, I ain’t had no stuff like that. That’s no stuff.

DRISCOLL: [Laughter]

ATKINS: [Laughter] And also no stuff, I don’t have any lessons. Go upstairs in your room and study what you had in school today.

DRISCOLL: And where did you go to school then?

ATKINS: I went to... When I first came here I went to Garnett. It was not a Junior High. It was two elementary schools. In February I went to the 7A. See, I was running in February, I was born in February. So I got tran—they didn’t have any 7A in Garnett. So I got transferred to Sumner.

DRISCOLL: Ah.

ATKINS: So graduated from Sumner. And went to Dunbar, but the teacher skipped me. And she said I would graduate out. Then I could graduate in June. And go to high school in September. She skipped three children, another little girl named Ruth, who was very smart, and I forget what the little boy’s name was. So, the three of us went on to Dunbar in September, by her skipping us. She said she thought we could do the work.

DRISCOLL: And was it hard.

ATKINS: No, I did OK. She just skipped me from the 7B to the 8B. And I went on to Dunbar, and I don’t believe it was too hard.

DRISCOLL: That was a very famous school back then?

ATKINS: Sumner, yeah.

DRISCOLL: No Dunbar.

ATKINS: Oh, it was all over the country.

DRISCOLL: Yeah.

ATKINS: A very good school. One thing you see... for colored people there weren't many good jobs. You really had the finest of people for teachers. That's what made it. It was a good school.

DRISCOLL: Any special memories about being there?

ATKINS: Well, some, but nothing particular. But... you know, I did my work, tried to pass, and belonged to a couple of clubs. I used to do a lot of acting. I was voted the best actress in my class when I graduated. I liked amateur acting. So that was my hobby when I started to teach. Amateur acting.

DRISCOLL: So did you help kids put on shows then?

ATKINS: I had my children... I always had my children in plays. And I was always in plays. I was voted the best actress in my class when I graduated.

DRISCOLL: Do you do any acting after that?

ATKINS: Yeah, that was my hobby, amateur acting.

DRISCOLL: Where did you act?

ATKINS: Well, we used to have a group called the Krigwa Players.

DRISCOLL: And how do you say that?

ATKINS: The Garnet Patterson stage.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh. How do you spell the players?

ATKINS: I don't know. K-.... Must be K-R-I-G. Kwig. W-A. I guess, but I'm not sure that's right, I've forgotten. Krigwa Players.

DRISCOLL: Do you know what it means? [Laughter]

ATKINS: No, and I never heard anybody say what it meant.

DRISCOLL: What kind of plays were you in?

ATKINS: Mostly comedies, not laughing comedies but the serious plays they call comedies. I met my husband in the Krigwa Players.

DRISCOLL: Oh really?

ATKINS: He was in it when I joined. It was a good group. It was a good group. I love acting, amateur acting. And used to have a lot of plays with my pupils.

DRISCOLL: Did they like that too?

ATKINS: Children like being in plays... put them in and they love it.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh, Uh-huh.

ATKINS: So, I always had plays for my children. And I gave the first play when I came here for the PTA, at night. You all ever have a play for the PTA. They looked at me as if I was crazy. So I gave one. And then there was another girl. She and I got to be very good friends. Her name was Mary Garnes.

DRISCOLL: Her name was what?

ATKINS: Mary Grarnes, Garnes. And we used to give plays for the school, the PTA. And for children to be in. She was good at playing in them and so was I. So we got along fine. We became the best of friends. But she died, kind a young. She was an excellent teacher. But you meet some nice people where you work.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh, Uh-huh.

ATKINS: And you make some friends, yes.

DRISCOLL: Some that last.

ATKINS: Yes, some that last. She and I lasted.

DRISCOLL: How did—when you were a teaching, was it... segregation was still there?

ATKINS: Yeah, the schools were still segregated.

DRISCOLL: Segregated.

ATKINS: So a long time I taught in segregated schools.

DRISCOLL: How did that affect the kids and you?

ATKINS: Well, the children didn't know any different.

DRISCOLL: But you did?

ATKINS: I did. And I didn't like it. But the children, they hadn't come up under anything else.

DRISCOLL: Did segregation impact on your life on C Street?

ATKINS: Segregation was your life. Everything was segregated. You had separate churches, separate schools. You couldn't go to the plays downtown.

DRISCOLL: Not even in a...?

ATKINS: I spent a lot of money. I had to go to New York to see the plays, cause I loved that. So I just spent my money to see it. And I knew a girl who looked white, she could pass, but she said, she didn't pass for nothing except to see a play that she wanted to see. She said I want to see that, I'll just go. But other than that she didn't bother.

DRISCOLL: Ummm.

ATKINS: I said I would too, if I could but I have spend my money to go to New York to see the play.

DRISCOLL: Cause New York wasn't a southern city?

ATKINS: Yeah, a southern city. And I loved plays, so I would spend my money to go to New York. To see a...

DRISCOLL: What kind of plays especially did you like?

ATKINS: Well, I guess you would call them comedies, not funny. It was just a light play, I liked.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: And I used to do a lot of amateur acting too. I liked that.

DRISCOLL: You said even the churches were segregated?

ATKINS: It was... colored churches.

DRISCOLL: Was that St. Cyprian's for you?

ATKINS: Huh?

DRISCOLL: Was that St. Cyprian's for you?

ATKINS: Was that what?

DRISCOLL: St. Cyprian's

ATKINS: I went to St. Cyprian's. Yeah, at one time.

DRISCOLL: Yeah.

ATKINS: You know about St. Cyprian's?

DRISCOLL: That's a lovely...

ATKINS: It was a lovely church at night. My mother-in-law. She was a big worker in that... the Atkins people did a lot, they put in a lot of money. They gave all to the Blessed Virgin and they gave property for the school.

DRISCOLL: Really?

ATKINS: Yeah, they did a lot. They gave the family homestead to something. For the church. They were big Catholics. I wasn't a Catholic. I married a Catholic and I became a Catholic. But I was an Episcopalian.

DRISCOLL: When you were growing up? Until you were married?

ATKINS: Yeah, when I was growing up. I never became a Catholic till I was married.

DRISCOLL: When they gave land for the school, wow that's really generous.

ATKINS: When they what?

DRISCOLL: When they gave the land for the school, for St. Cyprian School.

ATKINS: The Atkins family gave the land for a school for colored children, that didn't have any, a Catholic school for colored children. That gave the land with their family homestead on it.

DRISCOLL: When did they homestead?

ATKINS: I don't know. It was before my time.

DRISCOLL: [Laughter]

ATKINS: When I got there they had already given it, you know.

DRISCOLL: How did people... How did the family feel then when the Archdiocese sold it?

ATKINS: When what?

DRISCOLL: When the Bishop sold it?

ATKINS: He came in and told her that he was going to sell it. Was nothing that she could say or do.

DRISCOLL: Was she hurt or angry?

ATKINS: I think she was hurt.

DRISCOLL: I sure would be.

ATKINS: They gave their family homestead standing on the corner. And that block was three quarters of a block square that they gave.

DRISCOLL: Wow.

ATKINS: And they gave a lot to the church too.

DRISCOLL: Hmm. And there was a wonderful old tree. I don't know what kind of tree it was, but it was a great big tree in the St. Cyprian courtyard, in back.

ATKINS: I don't remember, but I guess I should remember, but I don't.

DRISCOLL: So when St. Cyprian's was torn down, is that when you started coming to St. Peter's?

ATKINS: Oh, I think they made a dividing line, and we were supposed to go to St. Peter's wherever... And I went.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh. And were you welcomed at St. Peter's? Or was it sort of iffy?

ATKINS: Well, my sister-in-law was the organist. She played beautifully. They didn't treat her so good. Didn't want her playing no organ. One time they locked the doors so she couldn't get up there.

DRISCOLL: Oh.

ATKINS: You know you hate to see the Church do that. Somebody in the Church. And the heads of the Church should know it. And should not let it happen.

DRISCOLL: Yes.

ATKINS: Cause Emily could sing. She was supposed to be the organist choir director. They didn't want her. They one time kind of locked the doors so she couldn't get up there. I don't know who did it. But she couldn't get up there.

DRISCOLL: And her name was Atkins, Emily Atkins.

ATKINS: Her married name was Wells. Emily Atkins Wells.

DRISCOLL: Did she ever get that resolved or get so she could play?

ATKINS: Well she went. I don't know if they always treated her so well. She knew that music. Somebody said who is that playing the organ, she really playing. She went to the Howard University School of Music.

DRISCOLL: Umm, so she was really good?

ATKINS: My husband's people were musical but not me.

DRISCOLL: You were theatrical?

ATKINS: Yeah, I can't sing. I can't carry a tune. So you have to accept what you can do. What you can do and can't do. You can't do everything. So you do it the best you can. So, I've gotten along all right. Whenever the Archbishop came to St. Cyprian he would always ask, "Who's that playing the organ so beautifully?" She was my sister-in-law. The Atkins people were musical.

DRISCOLL: Was that Archbishop O'Boyle?

ATKINS: Yeah, yeah, he always say who's that playing that organ so well.

DRISCOLL: When you first came to St. Peter's then, were you able to sit wherever you wanted to, or...?

ATKINS: On the whole, but I went there at night one time to something and some usher came up to me and told me that I was sitting in somebody's pew. So he moved me to the back. I moved myself out the door. I didn't stay.

DRISCOLL: Yep.

ATKINS: Cause I don't think when churches come to segregate, it's terrible. They should not do it. They should be an example.

DRISCOLL: Um-hum. Yeah, I...

ATKINS: But they do it.

DRISCOLL: I think now.

ATKINS: It's better. It's better.

DRISCOLL: Yeah, things have changed.

ATKINS: It's really better.

DRISCOLL: What other changes have you seen? What other changes, in the neighborhood or services or stores or...?

ATKINS: Well, I don't think it's as bad. But I can't put my hand on it. I don't think it's as bad as it was. I don't really think so. Well they made zones and I was supposed to go... when I lived in the 800 block of C Street, I was supposed to go to St. Peter's, and not St. Cyprian. They made zones.

DRISCOLL: But because your family was the Atkins family was such a supporter of St. Cyprian's?

ATKINS: Yeah, they were. They had given a lot of money to the church and property and...

DRISCOLL: It's really generous.

ATKINS: Things for the altar. They gave to the altar the Virgin Mary. And when they moved, you know, and they tore down that church, they sent me some stuff that was standing on the altar that they had given. I don't remember what it was now. They had given a lot to the church. And Miss Marion Atkins was very well respected.

DRISCOLL: When you were working teaching, where did you do your grocery shopping?

ATKINS: There used to be Safeway on Seventh Street.

DRISCOLL: Yes.

ATKINS: Across from the Market. I use to go there. And to the Market too. I kind of miss that Safeway, when it went. And I forget where they took it. Somewhere kind of far.

DRISCOLL: It's at 14th and Kentucky now.

ATKINS: Now, but it was someplace else too, before there.

DRISCOLL: Further down Seventh.

ATKINS: Yeah, that's right, further down Seventh.

DRISCOLL: Below the library?

ATKINS: That's right, that's right. That's where it was. I don't know what's in that place where the Safeway was. I did know but I have forgotten.

DRISCOLL: I think it's a nursing association or something. Offices.

ATKINS: Uh-huh. When I... that Safeway was there.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: Very convenient the Safeway and the Market together.

DRISCOLL: Yeah. Did you use the Market very much?

ATKINS: Did I use the Market?

DRISCOLL: The Market very much?

ATKINS: I used to go on Saturday. The Atkins used to have a stand in the Market.

DRISCOLL: Oh, what did they sell?

ATKINS: Groceries, I think.

DRISCOLL: Groceries.

ATKINS: And so, when Melanie [Mrs. Atkins' daughter] was a young girl and the man was talking about the Market. And he said, the Atkins family had a stand and Melanie marched up, she was a little girl and said that Mr. Atkins that you were talking to they have a stand. She said that was my grandmother and my grandfather. [laughter]

DRISCOLL: Wow.

ATKINS: You know how children are, if they know something they are going to tell it.

DRISCOLL: Is Melanie your daughter?

ATKINS: Yeah, and a—that market. Do you know when things were being rationed? Miss Marion was giving me chicken and everybody at the Market. Miss Marion don't you go on for nothing. You just tell me and you will get it. She would bring me chicken.

DRISCOLL: Wow.

ATKINS: She would get it. She used to have this stand you know. And the men still knew her and they treated her fine. She always had... given me chickens, and I had a cousin and his wife lived on 15th Street Northwest. She would not come in but she was always coming over my house to bring us food or something for the children. She said I think the little children can't have the things they want. But that's terrible she said, they need. And I was myself pregnant and I need it too.

DRISCOLL: Right.

ATKINS: She used to come over but she wouldn't come in, but she was always bringing me something, for the children. She said that she didn't like to see children wanting for the stuff. But everything was rationed then.

DRISCOLL: What other things do you remember about the wartimes?

ATKINS: Which war?

DRISCOLL: Well, we could start.....

ATKINS: When I came here it was 1918, when I came here.

DRISCOLL: Yeah.

ATKINS: That was World War II?

DRISCOLL: One.

ATKINS: One, that's when I came 1918.

DRISCOLL: What was that like?

ATKINS: Well I was just about nine years old, I didn't know too much about it. My father didn't have to go, because my mother had died.

END TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

ATKINS: We were in Ithaca, but my father brought us down here. And my sister was always a know-it-all. She said brothers down there and then they don't have to go to war. Well, I said I can't blame him.

DRISCOLL: Was he in real estate up in Ithaca too?

ATKINS: Well, no. My father went to Cornell University and he met my mother there. They got married. And he stayed up there and finished. She died, so then they came on back here, where he was from.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh, uh-huh

ATKINS: My husband was in real estate.

DRISCOLL: That's right, that's right.

ATKINS: But he used to work... he ran the real estate in the day and he worked in the post office at night.

DRISCOLL: Did he run into much segregation in the post office?

ATKINS: Sometime, yeah.

DRISCOLL: And prejudice?

ATKINS: Sometime. My son experienced some. I forget the incident now. But he did. He worked in the post office.

DRISCOLL: That must have been tough to help your kids deal with that?

ATKINS: Yeah, it's hard. I figure that's the reason a lot of them parents have them in colored schools. But Philip went to St. John's High School.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: I don't remember him complaining about any prejudice.

DRISCOLL: That's good. How about your girl?

ATKINS: Well, she went to the Academy of Our Lady. And did very well, express my daughter, not because she is mine but because she is very smart.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: And I... experienced some prejudice from one of the sisters. But you know when I get mad, I can be very nice but I get my point over.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: Now my daughter by nature is very neat. And I brought them up to be neat. And she just gave her an ordinary mark in the cleanliness you know or something or other. I went up there and I said... Now I said Melanie has a bath every day. She had clean clothes from the skin out everyday. I said now her uniform you say wash them. But I have them cleaned. She has a clean blouse that goes with it every day. She does her nails. She takes... Now what would you suggest that I could do that would make her get a better mark? And you know the priest didn't like it. They have the overall and I went there. He said, "Well hello Melanie, you are all right. Mrs. Atkins you are all right too." And that lady was there after February, he got rid of her.

DRISCOLL: Hah.

ATKINS: She treated the little colored children bad. And Melanie was smart. And not because she was my daughter, but she was smart. And when Melanie was in the second grade the teacher wrote Melanie has a remarkable memory. And Melanie graduated from eighth grade number one. She graduated from high school number two. She graduated from Teachers College magna cum laude. And she went on and got her... her masters and her PhD from Prince George's [ed: University of Maryland]. And she is no dummy. And some woman was saying something about her one old white teachers. She said, "Look, don't say anything about that girl, because she is one of the smartest students that ever came through this school." And you know some people don't like colored people and some colored people don't like white people. That's the way they do.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: So she went on. And she got... She graduated magnum cum laude from... Somebody said that Melanie was smart and I ought to send her to Wellesley. And I was sitting there figuring did I have any money to send her to Wellesley, since everybody says she is so smart. Melanie came home one day and said, "Mama I've registered at the DC Teachers College." Melanie always did what she thought she ought to do. [laughter]. And she graduated magnum cum laude. She couldn't have done any better at Wellesley. So then she went on to Prince George's and got her masters and her PhD.

DRISCOLL: And what does she do?

ATKINS: She's a dean of some... in the schools you know. Silver Spring, I think. She is the dean of... I don't remember what department though. [ed: Dean of the School of Business at University of the District of Columbia]

DRISCOLL: Sounds like she's done very well.

ATKINS: Yes, she's smart. Not because she is my child but I'm a teacher and a mother and I know she is smart. And she knows what she wants to do and she manages it herself. I was trying back then there so smart. And I was trying to figure, could I send her to Wellesley. And she came home one evening and said Momma I'm registered at the Teachers College. Now she did what she thought she ought to do. She graduated magnum cum laude, from Teachers College.

DRISCOLL: That's...

ATKINS: But she is the dean of something. In the Silver Spring. She does all right.

DRISCOLL: Do you remember how things were during World War II, when you were a young woman?

ATKINS: Somewhat, I remember some things.

DRISCOLL: Any of the Presidents coming by or parades or...?

ATKINS: Well, I taught a Birney School and the President came one day. We all went out in the yard and looked at him pass by. I don't know where he was coming from I don't know where he was going.

DRISCOLL: Which president?

ATKINS: I don't remember.

DRISCOLL: Just one of them.

ATKINS: I don't remember, I really don't. Well when I was in the yard and looked. But I should remember, but I've forgotten.

DRISCOLL: Were there any things that you would have liked to have done, that were not able to do? It sounds like you got yourself to New York to see the theater.

ATKINS: And I did. And I wouldn't deprive myself. I liked that. I belonged to a Krigwa Players, That was a drama club, and I used to do amateur acting. I liked that.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh, were there things that you were kept out of because you were African-American?

ATKINS: It was the theater.

DRISCOLL: Yeah, besides that.

ATKINS: It was very important to me. I was to spend my money to go to New York I said I got to do it because I got to see the good plays.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: So I was kept out of that. I don't remember... I went up to St. Peter's Church, not St. Peter's. The church up there above U Street, above...

DRISCOLL: Oh, Saint...

ATKINS: And I sat out in the part... the man told me I was in somebody's pew.

DRISCOLL: St. Paul and Augustine?

ATKINS: Yeah.

DRISCOLL: Is that it?

ATKINS: Yeah, I'm sorry lady you are in somebody's pew. And I went out the door. I went straight down the aisle and out the door. I'm not in anybody's pew. You just don't want any colored persons sitting down front. I still don't let them usher me where I supposed to sit.

DRISCOLL: [Laughter].

ATKINS: Yeah...

DRISCOLL: Were you still teaching then when segregation... when the schools were segregated?

ATKINS: Yeah, I taught in segregated schools.

DRISCOLL: But when they were unsegregated?

ATKINS: Didn't have any white children in them... in the neighborhood.

DRISCOLL: In the neighborhood, yeah.

ATKINS: I think there was one white child. See because the neighborhood was segregated. So that kept the schools segregated.

DRISCOLL: Yeah, yeah. Those were not good days.

ATKINS: No. A little better I guess. I don't know.

DRISCOLL: Some places, but not enough.

ATKINS: Yeah, not enough. Cause there still is no reason why children can't go to school together. No reason at all. They learn from each other.

DRISCOLL: Sure.

ATKINS: Yeah.

DRISCOLL: I am trying to think. Are there other things you remember about the neighborhood, because white people must have moved in on Eighth Street, fairly soon?

ATKINS: It was an odd thing. I lived up Northwest. And my husband came from Southeast. So when we married, he brought me out to C Street on Capitol Hill. And I was very surprised to find the neighborhood was integrated.

DRISCOLL: Huh. That had not been your experience.

ATKINS: No. And I was surprised to find that.

DRISCOLL: Were you pleased or did it make things harder?

ATKINS: No, it didn't affect me at all. Atkins owned four properties on C Street. So they were rented on one side to white people.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: But, when we came in and my mother-in-law said, "Pick out what house you want and I'll put the people out," who were white people. "And you all can have that house. Cause my son doesn't have to wait for me to die to get a house." That's what she said. [Laughter]

DRISCOLL: [Laughter]

ATKINS: She was a nice old lady. But I didn't have any trouble. All around Ninth Street was white people. And the 800 block of C there was kind of... some white and some black.

DRISCOLL: Did you get on with everybody? Did the different...?

ATKINS: I got along fine with everybody. I didn't have any troubles.

DRISCOLL: That's what I keep hearing from people that I'm interviewing. That on an individual basis that black people and white people were doing just fine together.

ATKINS: Yeah, letting alone. Just like if you let the children play together, there wouldn't be any prejudice.

DRISCOLL: Yeah.

ATKINS: Some lady whose husband was a doctor, they were well to do, so they bought a home in a very nice neighborhood. And I think they have a little girl that they had adopted. And this woman next door came and rang the doorbell and she said I don't mind living next door to you. But I don't want my children to play with your children. Well, thought to myself, well keep them home then. I ain't coming over there after them. But I don't know what the lady said. I don't mind living next door to you. But I

don't want my children playing with your children. I would say lady that's your problem. Keep them home.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

ATKINS: That's so silly. Cause if you leave the children alone there wouldn't be any prejudice. Cause they don't care when they are little. They play with who they get to play with. Somebody told—this white lady came home with her groceries and people next door were colored, but she didn't know it and the man was out there working in his yard and she thought he was a workman. So she called him to ask him if he would bring in her groceries for her. He said certainly and when she got to the door she said, would you take off your shoes please because I like to keep my floors nice. He did that. He took them into the kitchen and set them down. He did that and I think she gave him a quarter. And thanked him. He said you are very welcome madam. And maybe sometimes your husband will help my wife with her groceries; I'm your next door neighbor. She almost died [laughter].

DRISCOLL: Ah [laughter]

ATKINS: Too bad he wasn't working out in that yard for somebody. I'd be like Mary McLeod Bethune was going in the White House. She was a personal friend of Mrs. Roosevelt. And somebody said, "Well, darcy, where do you think you're going?" So she looked at them and she said, "Well, now, just which one of my sister's children are you?" That was a good answer.

DRISCOLL: [Laughter] right, right.

ATKINS: I'm glad she said it. [Laughter]. She was Mrs. Roosevelt's personal friend. So she was going to see Mrs. Roosevelt. And I don't think that Mrs. Roosevelt was prejudiced.

DRISCOLL: No, I don't either. Do you have any other memories about Mrs. Roosevelt or Franklin?

ATKINS: No, he was very much in the public's eye. We would read something about him in the paper about him all the time. And I think he was a good president.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Were you aware that he was wheelchair bound, when you were growing up?

ATKINS: Yeah.

DRISCOLL: Did you know that, I didn't. I grew up in Minnesota. And I didn't know.

ATKINS: He would be out with somebody helping him all the time.

DRISCOLL: We never saw that part in Minnesota, we just saw him riding in the car with that long cigarette holder.

ATKINS: He raised it didn't he?

DRISCOLL: Yep.

ATKINS: He raised it!

DRISCOLL: Yep.

ATKINS: So that... Well, a lot of things.

DRISCOLL: Anything else you feel like talking about or...

ATKINS: There was some little boy that lived near me and he wanted a job. He couldn't get one. I think he was... I don't know whether he was crippled or was... He wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt and she got him a job.

DRISCOLL: Uh. That's a good thing.

ATKINS: I think she was a nice fair minded lady.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh. Did you have other politicians you liked or admired or some you didn't like so much?

ATKINS: Well, there was a lot you didn't like. You had to put up with it.

DRISCOLL: Right, right.

ATKINS: There wasn't too much you could do about it.

DRISCOLL: Was it hard for you to get to vote?

ATKINS: I don't remember. I voted whenever I could. When voting was available, I voted.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: I voted. And old Mr. Roosevelt was a cripple, but... he went right on as best he could.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

ATKINS: And he was a good president, I think.

DRISCOLL: Yeah. I think she helped him be a good president.

ATKINS: I think she did too. I think she did too. She maybe was the brains behind him.

DRISCOLL: Or at least the social conscience part.

ATKINS: Huh?

DRISCOLL: The social conscience part.

ATKINS: Yeah. She was a very fine person, I think. Uh-huh. And I don't think that she was prejudiced. And I don't think that he was either.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh. Yeah.

ATKINS: Do you have any special recollections of changes, like from the twenties to the thirties to the forties?

DRISCOLL: Not that I can think of. But there were changes. I am sure I recognized them at that time. But not... I think Mr. Roosevelt did a lot of things and she did too.

ATKINS: Yes. Yes.

DRISCOLL: Do you have any recollection of different seasons in the city?

ATKINS: Differences in what?

DRISCOLL: Different seasons. Winter and summer. Did you go down to Haines Point in the summer time? Sometimes.

ATKINS: She went down there didn't she?

DRISCOLL: Sometimes, yeah.

ATKINS: And he died down there. Some people think that they did not get along too well. I don't know. But they stayed together.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh. And you still have your daughter, who is alive, and your two sons?

ATKINS: No, I have one son.

DRISCOLL: One son.

ATKINS: And he is dead. I had one daughter and one son. That's all I had.

DRISCOLL: Ah.

ATKINS: And he died. He died two days after his 42nd birthday. He was a nice fellow and I miss him. But he went away from here. And I just have those two children, a boy and a girl. I still got her. She's very nice to me. She went away. She bought me this little bracelet, wherever she went. Somewhere in Jersey. She and her husband go every year for a week. So she brought me that. I like the little bracelet.

DRISCOLL: Yes, its very pretty, I was noticing... I was noticing it earlier.

ATKINS: She brought this yesterday.

DRISCOLL: Ah, did they have any children?

ATKINS: Yeah, she has a daughter, adopted. Her name is Stephanie. She is grown now, but she is not married. She's a fashion designer.

DRISCOLL: Hmmm.

ATKINS: Well, you know she fixed her work and she took it to Pratt.

DRISCOLL: Really? Wow.

ATKINS: She took her work herself. Didn't send in an application. She just took it up there. That was right smart.

DRISCOLL: Sounds like she takes after her mother.

ATKINS: I don't know. [Laughter]

DRISCOLL: And maybe you too.

ATKINS: I don't know. Her mother was very smart in school. Some old lady, somebody said something about Melanie. And this old white lady said, look don't you say anything about that girl. She in one of the smartest students that ever came through this school. So just shut up. [Laughter]

DRISCOLL: Sounds like you had other people helping defend your kids..

ATKINS: Yeah, well, some people are for the fair. What's right.

DRISCOLL: Yep.

ATKINS: And some are not, but I never had any trouble with her being in school. Philip went to St. John's. And Melanie went... well she went to St. Cyprian elementary school and then she went to the Academy of Our Lady High School. She was number one from St. Cyprian's and number two from the

Academy of Our Lady. And then she went to ah... Teacher's College. And she was magnum cum laude. Then she went on to Maryland and got her Masters and her PhD. So she is doing all right for herself. She was smart girl. I didn't want her to... I knew she had a good memory. And I... I didn't really realize she was smart. But she is very smart, even if she is my child. She is.

DRISCOLL: That's good, that's good. How do you think living and growing up and raising you family here has affected you...?

ATKINS: Well, certainly everything was segregated.

DRISCOLL: Did integration make things easier for you or was it more of a hassle?

ATKINS: I think so. I think it gave the children more of a chance.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: But Melanie... well, she went to St. Cyprian Elementary Catholic School.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: She went to a Academy of Our Lady secondary school, and then she went to Minor Teachers College, and then she went to Prince Georges College and got her Masters and her PhD. So she has got a good job. She is dean of something.

DRISCOLL: So she...

ATKINS: In Silver Spring, I don't know what school. I don't know where. It's the University of the District of Columbia or what. But she is doing all right.

DRISCOLL: Did she run into much segregation or difficulties?

ATKINS: I don't think so. She said they were promoting her and it would call for more travel.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh, so, they respected her ability?

ATKINS: Sometimes you are smart you get a chance cause they see you can do it.

DRISCOLL: Yeah.

ATKINS: And they want somebody who can do it.

DRISCOLL: Yeah, yeah. Where were you living on... yeah you were probably on Eighth Street at the time that Dr. King was killed?

ATKINS: Was I living where?

DRISCOLL: You were on Eighth Street.

ATKINS: Eighth?

DRISCOLL: No, C Street.

ATKINS: I probably was.

DRISCOLL: When Dr. King was killed.

ATKINS: Probably, cause I moved there when I married. In 1935, when I was there.

DRISCOLL: Do you remember much about when the Poor Peoples Campaign was, or after Dr. King....?

ATKINS: Yeah, I remember, and I remember. Yeah, I remember that. And I remember, you know, when there was a lot of about Martin Luther King..

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: I read his wife was sick.

DRISCOLL: Yeah, I saw that, I haven't seen anything?

ATKINS: No I haven't... it said whatever. It bodes something kind of bad, but I haven't seen anything else.

DRISCOLL: Yeah, I haven't seen anything in the paper either. I hope she is OK.

ATKINS: But sometime people don't let a lot of stuff out.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: I hope she'll be OK.

DRISCOLL: What did you think of Dr. King and what he was trying to do?

ATKINS: I think that he was doing the best he can... could. Now, but if was going to do any good or not, I was never sure.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

ATKINS: But he tried. I met him once.

DRISCOLL: Did you?

ATKINS: Well, he was an Alpha man and my father was one of the founders of the Alpha fraternity. So it was something I went to with my father.

DRISCOLL: A-l.. Alpha?

ATKINS: Alpha. Alpha Phi. P-H-I, Alpha Phi Alpha, it was the first black fraternity.

DRISCOLL: And you went with your father?.

ATKINS: He was one of the founders. They called them brother jewels. At Cornell, they started it at Cornell. My father went to Cornell.

DRISCOLL: What did he major in there?

ATKINS: Huh?

DRISCOLL: What did he major in?

ATKINS: I don't have the slightest... He worked in Senator Warren's office in the Capitol. Senator Warren was a senator from Wyoming.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh. So being able to live on Eighth and C was close for him to walk to walk to work. You had the longer commute.

ATKINS: I always had a long way to go. I used to stand at 17th and U at 7:30 in the morning waiting for the bus.

DRISCOLL: Mmm

ATKINS: But when I got married I moved to the 800 block of C Street so that was much nearer for me, very much nearer. So I was glad of that. I didn't know anything about Southeast.

DRISCOLL: What did you think of Dr. King when you met him, Martin Luther King when you went to...?

ATKINS: Well, he was a pleasant... I didn't have any great conversations with him. My father was one of the founders of the Alpha Phi Alpha. And I think he was an Alpha man. And I think they gave something. And I was there. He was pleasant.

DRISCOLL: But didn't seem terribly charismatic or anything?

ATKINS: No.

DRISCOLL: Just sort of ordinary.

ATKINS: Something is in my eyes.

DRISCOLL: Umm

ATKINS: Hot out today isn't it?

DRISCOLL: It is, it is.

ATKINS: Well you know why they have... for some heat... in the summertime.

DRISCOLL: What did you used to do in the summertime heat, when you were younger?

ATKINS: Well, we used to have a... I belonged to a club and we got up when we were about eleven years old, called the GPT's. And we wouldn't tell anybody what the GPT's stood for. So one of the girl's husbands you don't have to tell me, I know. It stands for "got plenty tongue."

DRISCOLL: (Laughter)

ATKINS: (Laughter) So we had that club. Only three of us are living now. Everybody else is dead.

DRISCOLL: Would you go out and try to keep cool outside?

ATKINS: Well, we used to meet and we played cards. We played bridge; one time pinochle and we ahh... that night and we served food but then when everybody had retired we started meeting for lunch.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: And we had a nice time. And we had... got that club up I guess when we were maybe eleven or twelve.

DRISCOLL: Wow.

ATKINS: And we had a nice time and we got along fine. So we used to meet at night, but after everybody retired we started meeting in the afternoon. Now there are only three of us left.

DRISCOLL: Were the other club members teachers too, or...?

ATKINS: Everybody was a teacher. Everybody was a teacher.

DRISCOLL: That's pretty neat.

ATKINS: And we used to meet at night, but then when we all retired we started meeting in the afternoon and serving lunch.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: So we had a nice time. We don't meet anymore. I think that there are only three of us left. Alice Cornish and me and Lois Turner. I think the rest of them are dead.

DRISCOLL: Did they live in the neighborhood to or...?

ATKINS: Well, they lived... most of them lived in Northwest.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: Dorothy Howard Sales lived out in Anacostia and I lived when I got married I lived on C Street Southeast. The rest of them lived in Northwest. I don't think... Dorothy Howard Sales lived in Southeast. But I don't remember... Celestine built a beautiful home in Northeast, she and her husband. The rest of them lived in Northwest.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh.

ATKINS: All dead, mostly. They're dead, all dead.

DRISCOLL: Well, there must be some reason...

ATKINS: Only three of us left.

DRISCOLL: Do you still see them... see the other two?

ATKINS: Well, we don't meet anymore. So we talk on the phone. Alice Cornish and Lois, but she doesn't communicate. So I don't talk to her. And I don't know who else is living. Now I think they are all dead. So we don't meet anymore. Me and Alice Cornish and Lois. And Lois never calls. I talk to Alice sometimes. I don't... I think everybody is dead.

DRISCOLL: Uh-huh. What do you think are some of the most important changes and things that you have seen in your lifetime? Would it be easier... are you getting tired, would it be easier for me to come back another time?

ATKINS: No I'm OK. Umm, some of the changes, uh...

DRISCOLL: Or does it seem things have changed? Or does it seem things have changed very much?

ATKINS: I think the changes have been for the better. And things we used to do... now every June my high school class used to get together and have a banquet. They haven't done it for the last couple of years. So maybe we are not going to do it anymore. We are all getting old, you know. And nobody really wants to gather up. A girl named Flavor she was very good at getting the people together. But I understand, I just heard, that she's in the hospital. So I have to try to find out where, so I can send her a card. Cause I can't get around.

DRISCOLL: Yeah.

ATKINS: And she has been very nice to me. She has made me some very pretty dresses, when something was going on. She sews.

DRISCOLL: Like your grandmother.

ATKINS: Yeah. She just... she was a teacher, but she could sew. And ah...

DRISCOLL: Excuse me just one minute. [dealing with tape recorder]

ATKINS: And I didn't know that she lost her husband till I got a Christmas card. And it just said Flavor. I said oh Lord J. P. must be...

END TAPE 1/SIDE 2

[A second tape was started, with a few additional minutes of interview. There was essentially no additional information, and so it is not included in this transcription.]

END OF INTERVIEW