



Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler Thompson (Part I) --
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Funeral Director Wheeler Terrell Thompson was born in Fredericksburg on Oct. 6, 1905. He married Margaret French Kirkpatrick Thompson on July 16, 1932, and the couple has four children, Elizabeth Jane, Margaret Anne, John Kirkpatrick Thompson and Wyatt Wheeler Thompson.

Interviewer: ... your main area of interest is something that I'd like to hone in on. You started off in the automotive business, I think. I don't know if you actually had the business, but I was reading that you used to put cars together all by yourself and make a real car out of car parts.

Mrs. Thompson: Who told you that?

Interviewer: I read that.

Mrs. Thompson: Did you put cars together at one time?

Mr. Thompson: Oh, daddy gave me an old Model T Ford and a friend of mine and I took it all apart, took the engine apart and overhauled it, and put it back together. My first car.

Interviewer: Were you real interested in doing cars, or was that because you were a young man and you needed one?

Mr. Thompson: I just wanted one, I reckon. What happened, my brother was given a trip to camp in the summer for two months down in North Carolina. We usually got the same or equal, you know, always did, just the two boys. Later on, after that, I asked my father, I said you gave him a trip to camp in North Carolina for two months, how about giving me that old car you discarded? And he did. In fact, a man had come in to my father from the country and wanted a body off the old car that daddy wasn't using. He was going to use it for a chicken coop. And he did, daddy let him have it. And the man, in turn, gave daddy an old sport body that goes on the chassis. Real nice. It had one seat and had a top and a windshield and it was sitting in the old shed on the property there and I asked daddy about it and he said go on and take it. So a friend of mine and I took it and overhauled it and put

the little body on the chassis and got it all together and went into town and bought four second-hand tires. Didn't have enough money to buy new tires, but had four second-hand tires put on that old thing. It was an old Model T that had a crank. It didn't have a starter on it. That was an old one, a 1917 or '16 model. But this was in the '20's. It had been sitting there a long time.

Interviewer: So that was your first car?

Mr. Thompson: That was my first car. Then I used that. That was in '23 or '24, '23 I think, and I graduated in '25 from high school and my grandmother gave me the difference in the money from that. No, I went to Richmond one Saturday after school was over with a good friend of mine. I went to a motor company on Broad Street, Kirkmar Motor Company. And I looked around to see if they had a better car than what I had and they did, they had a touring car, a Ford. I asked the man the price of it and he said \$150. I said, how much would he give for this thing I was driving, and he said \$75. And I had \$50 in my pocket and I said I need \$25 more. I said, excuse me, I'll be back shortly. He said okay. I went to the Western Union office and wired my father for \$25. My mother said, "If he'd a known you'd wanted it today you'd a never gotten it." But he thought I'd gotten in trouble with the law, so he sent me the \$25! So I went and bought that old Ford.

Interviewer: And you came home with the new car?

Mr. Thompson: I came home with the new car, the old Model T Ford, two door open car, they called them touring cars. And we had all kinds of trouble with it, this friend of mine and I. When we left Richmond we had to come the old road to Fredericksburg, which was 70 some miles. They didn't have any concrete roads then.

Interviewer: They had no concrete roads from Fredericksburg to Richmond?

Mr. Thompson: It was 70-some miles to Richmond by the old dirt road. He and I came back through Ashland, came on the old nickel something road, whatever they called it. We got so far and the thing got hot on us. So I stopped on the side of the road and there was a well in the man's farm so I went and asked for a glass of water to put in the radiator. So he got me a bucket and my friend and I put water in the radiator and when I went to start it the Bendix spring on the starter broke and I had to crank it. When I went to crank it the pin in the crankshaft broke off. So I had no way to start it. But we were on a

little knob of a hill going up and then a knob of a hill going down so my friend and I got on the rear wheels and turned them by hand until they got to the top of the hill and then we rested a few minutes and we got in and gave it a push and got in and it started up. Then we came on home to Fredericksburg, came off at Spotsylvania Courthouse and got to Leavell's Shop and ran out of gas! It was about 1 in the morning then and we had left Richmond about 5. And in between I had flat tires one after the other. Had to take the tires off, patch the tube in it, pump it up, put it back on, all this, that and the other. In fact, I used a whole can of patches before we got to Fredericksburg. It was five flats, I believe.

Interviewer: This was the very day that you bought it, you went through all this?

Mr. Thompson: Yes, the day I bought it!

Interviewer: Your parents were probably worried that you weren't alive; you get home at 1:00 in the morning!

Mr. Thompson: I ran out of gas at Leavell's Shop. So he and I just sat there. I said, you sleep in the back seat, I'll sleep in the front, until somebody comes by. It wasn't long before a car came by so I jumped up and stopped them. A load of colored people, blacks, and they knew who I was, knew my father. So they said, "Do you want a ride into town?" and I said, "Yeah, as long as you don't mind. I ran out of gas and I'll go into town and get some gas." So they squeezed me in their car, there were a lot of people in the car, went on down to my father's place. I went down there and I had a key so I went to the gas pump (we had our own gas pump), got some gas in the can and took one of daddy's cars and went on back out there to where my car was and my friend and I drove on into town. He drove my new car! I drove daddy's car back into town, after we put gas in it.

Interviewer: What an adventure!

Mrs. Thompson: Oh, yeah, there were all kinds of adventures in those days. You were always running out of gas or having flat tires.

Mr. Thompson: Flat tires every time. We used to go to Richmond, every once in a while with my mother and father, and you could count on at least four or five flats before you get there, every time! Four and five flats every time from bad roads.

Interviewer: I wanted to ask you about a couple of other things. When I did my reading I saw that your dad used to be with radios also, didn't he? Did he work with the telegraphs for the railroads? So it looks like someone else in your family was interested in radio. That's where you got your love of ham radio.

Mr. Thompson: Well, I don't know. I know when I was a boy, my brother, we used to go up to—they had a tower down on Sophia Street. There was an upstairs to it and that controlled the tracks. See in those days there was one track through town. A double track on each end of town.

Interviewer: Track of what?

Mr. Thompson: Train. So they had the tower there to control the switches when the train came through.

Mrs. Thompson: He lived on lower Caroline. Honey, she doesn't know where you lived.

Mr. Thompson: 208 Caroline St.

Interviewer: So your dad worked for the railroad company there?

Mr. Thompson: Yes. On shifts, you know. The time I went down he worked, I think, daytime, he was working the day shift, but they rotated, they had several operators. I remember one time my brother and I, my mother had fixed dinner and put it in a big basket for my father and me and my brother took it up there in the middle of the day for daddy to eat and we went down one of those side streets and turned and came up to the tower and when we got there a train was sitting there in the station. The engine was sitting right there by the tower because the coal car was taking on water there was a pump right there. And they had a box contraption that the rods and stuff were inside of that they worked the switches with. So my brother and I laid the basket of dinner on top of the—I call it a box, somewhere around three or four feet, and I looked and was climbing over the thing with my feet to get on the other side of it and the engineer was sitting in the window of the engine. And just as we climbed over he looked down and he pulled his whistle and it made my brother and I jump so bad that we hit the basket of food and it went down on the ground upside down! Lost it all! I looked up at that engineer sitting there in the engine and he was busting his sides laughing. He was

really laughing! So we had to go back and get some more food for my father.

Interviewer: How old were you then, when this happened?

Mr. Thompson: I guess I was six or seven. My brother was two years younger than I was.

Interviewer: Were there just the two of you boys?

Mr. Thompson: Just two boys.

Interviewer: When did your father decide that he was going to join the family business?

Mr. Thompson: Well, my grandfather was in the business, E.K. Wheeler Funeral. And, I think it was 1912, he was paralyzed and he asked my father

Interviewer: Your grandfather was paralyzed? Did he have a stroke?

Mr. Thompson: He could talk. And he asked my father to help out in his off hours from the railroad, which daddy did. Then my grandfather got pretty much better and he came back full time, but it wasn't long before he was paralyzed a second time, from which he never recovered. But he stayed paralyzed about two years. At the beginning of this two-year period he asked my father to quit the railroad and if he did he would give him half interest 'in the business. So daddy did, he quit the railroad. That's when they formed the Wheeler and Thompson. That was about 1912, I think, or 1913.

Mrs. Thompson: His grandfather was a Wheeler. Interviewer: Mr. Thompson, when you started work there you didn't start off in the family business?

Mr. Thompson: No.

Interviewer: What was your initial interest, what did you want to do?

Mr. Thompson: Anything electrical. I went to Virginia Tech, VPI. I was going to be an electrical engineer. But I only went two years and I quit. Then after I quit and came home I didn't do nothing no job.

Interviewer: Was there a story behind why you left school?

Mr. Thompson: I just didn't go back. I just went two years and that was it. I loafed a while and finally Daddy told me that Mr. Colbert, who had his garage right across from the funeral home, and his son was running the Ford Motor Company. And he had old man Colbert, Lucent Colbert, had an office over there. But Mr. Colbert was a contractor for roads, building concrete roads in Maryland and Virginia. And Daddy said Mr. Colbert was looking for somebody to drive him. So I went over there one day and talked to Mr. Colbert and he said, "Yeah, I'd like to have a chauffeur," so he hired me so I worked for him almost a year.

Interviewer: Were you driving on those dirt roads?

Mr. Thompson: Dirt roads, yeah. By that time the concrete roads had been started in places. So he had a job up there in Maryland, Gaithersburg and Rockville, building a road between the two places in concrete. And I had to drive him up there every day and he came home every night.

Interviewer: How long did that drive take?

Mr. Thompson: I don't remember. I do remember one time we had to go through Alexandria, go through Russell Road to get around, and a cop stopped me one day and he said you have one more block to go (unintelligible) he was a city cop. He stopped me for speeding. And Mr. Colbert had to go back he paid my fine and it came out in the Alexandria Gazette paper about my being one of the violators of the law. And some friends of mine saw that and they used to come to Fredericksburg for business and they told me about they saw it in the paper where I was picked up for speeding!

Mrs. Thompson: But Mr. Colbert kept telling him to drive fast if he wanted to get there.

Mr. Thompson: Old Man Colbert was a man who didn't believe in poking along. Sixty miles an hour was slow to him.

Interviewer: What did you do all day when you drove him up there?

Mr. Thompson: I just sat in his car. Once in a while he gave me some figures to work on his work. I'd dear them out for him. I'd just sit there and wait for him.

Interviewer: You just sat there? That's a long day for you!

Mr. Thompson: I know one day we were in Gaithersburg and he found out he could get something to eat at this house, old man Soper, had a store there and had a very nice house. And he took in boarders and people would eat, and she had a daughter. And we went in there to eat and sat down and that daughter came out of the kitchen with some food and took one look at me, she dropped all her food on the floor! I don't know why. Still don't to this day, but she dropped everything right on the floor!

Interviewer: You didn't ask her?

Mr. Thompson: No.

Interviewer: You're a very self-controlled man!

Mrs. Thompson: He was a handsome young man. Still is a handsome man.

Mr. Thompson: When she came out and took one look at me, down on the floor went all her food. I don't know why!

Mrs. Thompson: She was smitten with you, Bus. All the ladies were smitten with you. It's a wonder I ever landed you!

Interviewer: Let's get into that. You met Mr. Thompson at college?

Mrs. Thompson: No, when I came to college at Fredericksburg.

Interviewer: How did you all meet?

Mr. Thompson: That's another story. A friend of mine and I used to go to the college in my car and act like a taxi. A lot of boys in town did it - bring their girls to town and want to go back in the afternoon, 5:00, 5:30. We'd go along pick them up and bring them back to the college and drop them. One day we had one girl in they're from Hopewell and we got talking. She said she had a sister in Brooklyn, in New York, and he said, "Well, I've got some relatives up in Brooklyn." And they got to talking about it and finally he said, "Let's get together and go up there one weekend." So I said all right. So she got me a date and it was her blind date. I didn't even know her. I had a Chevrolet convertible coupe, one seat with a rumble seat in the back. And we got up to the Betty Washington dormitory where they lived and they had to decide who was going to ride in the rumble seat and who was going to ride up front. We tossed a coin and I won her. She sat up front.

Mrs. Thompson: And then the other couple sat in the rumble seat.

Mr. Thompson: But when we got to Triangle, VA between Quantico, it started raining. And it rained from then on. We had to all four ride on that one seat to New York City, which we did. All night long.

Interviewer: The seat wasn't very big.

Mr. Thompson: You could get three on the front seat; the other one had to sit on somebody's lap - all the way to New York City!

Mrs. Thompson: I was the smallest, I sat on the lap.

Interviewer: How long was that drive?

Mr. Thompson: We got to New York about 5:30, 6 in the morning.

Mrs. Thompson :All the roads were not paved we got lost one time.

Mr. Thompson: We had to take the ferry across (can't understand) in Pennsylvania. Across the river - we had to take the ferry across that. It was pouring rain when we went across the ferry.

Mrs. Thompson: And it rained the whole weekend.

Mr. Thompson: The whole weekend it rained

Interviewer: Did you have any fun in New York at all?

Mrs. Thompson: We rode around, but you'd have to look up to see anything.

Mr. Thompson: We went by the Empire State Building but it was so foggy you couldn't see but about three stories up, you couldn't see the rest of the building at all.

Interviewer: How did you keep seeing each other after that weekend?

Mrs. Thompson: We started dating. I was at college.

Interviewer: How long did it take before you realized that she was the one for you?

Mr. Thompson: Well, this was in the spring, she finished in June.

Mrs. Thompson: We eloped. We didn't tell anyone we were married.

Interviewer: That's the next part - I had heard that somewhere. You all eloped?

Mrs. Thompson: Everybody eloped all the time in those days. At the college, there were girls eloping all the time with somebody. At Mary Washington every once in a while somebody would say, "Oh, so-and-so went off to get married and so-and-so, another couple, went with them and they decided to get married too!"

Interviewer: How did you decide you were going to elope?

Mr. Thompson: I don't know, we just decided. She had a sister in Baltimore and I had, my best friend, I was in his marriage and they lived in Baltimore. So went up there to spend a weekend with them and got married and they were our best man and, what do you call it?

Interviewer: And you just came home and said, "Guess what, we're married?"

Mrs. Thompson: We didn't announce it. I was supposed to go to work to help some of my brothers and sisters.

Interviewer: So you came home married and didn't tell anybody?

Mrs. Thompson: We didn't tell anybody.

Interviewer: For how long?

Mr. Thompson: For about, that was July. It was September, I think. We decided to let them know and I was at a funeral one day, out to buried in the country, I decided I'd tell my father then and there wasn't anybody else around except for the grave diggers. And I had my license in my pocket to prove that I was married in case he questioned it. You know what he said? "I thought so." That's all he said!

Interviewer: So then you got a place together, after you finally told.

Mr. Thompson: After we told it we went to Baltimore, spent a week with her sister. And then we came home and my mother and father found a place right across the street from where they lived, an upstairs apartment. The whole upstairs was vacant. And the people downstairs were renting it out, so we took it. We lived there until Betty was born and then we moved out.

Mrs. Thompson: That was lower Caroline Street, below the railroad.

Mr. Thompson: 209 Caroline St. We lived at 208, my home.

Interviewer: Were you still driving for Mr. Colbert at that time?

Mr. Thompson: No.

Interviewer: What were you doing then? Were you working for your Dad by then? 1932 or were you working for AT&T when you got married?

Mr. Thompson: I worked for AT&T in '29. I worked for Mr. Colbert almost a year and then I quit him and found there was a job open at the American Telephone and Telegraph Company repeater station, just down the road here. It's something else now.

Interviewer: And what did you do for them?

Mr. Thompson: The building was full of repeaters hooked onto the cables that ran from New York to Florida. And I even got a job with the company at one time in the summer when they were putting the cables up. Before they build the building they were putting the cables up on telephone poles. The splicer had to come along and splice the cable ends together after they got the cables all up. That's when I worked for them one summer with a friend of mine to help the splicers. We had to carry their tools, had to walk through the woods to where the splicers were and they had to connect the ends together.

Interviewer: So sometimes you had outdoor work and sometimes you had indoor work?

Mr. Thompson: Well, that was outdoor work for that summer. My friend and I worked the whole summer, as long as they were in the Fredericksburg area. When they got to the Richmond area they got guys from Richmond to help them out, same way in Washington. But they'd go about half way and then they'd pick up other guys. One time we were sitting up there at Garrisonville and at lunchtime we sat down and we were eating our lunch and I leaned back and smoked a cigarette and I heard a noise and turned around and looked and there was a moccasin snake within about two feet of my hand, looking right at me. Man, did I jump. And then the other guys who did the work saw it and the snake went into a hole near my hand down in the ground.

They went and got a ladle of lead that they used to seal up the cable and poured it down in the hole on top of the snake, hot lead.

Interviewer: You worked for them two years?

Mr. Thompson: That was just one summer. Then, I don't know if it was after that oh, it was after that that I worked for Colbert for about a year and then after I worked for him I heard about the job opened at the repeater station. They'd opened the building and they were hiring people. And they worked for awhile before they wanted another guy. So I heard about it and I went out there, I think about nine of us went out there to interview with the head man for the job. I got the job. There was about nine guys. I asked two guys working out there at the time, they were friends of mine, went to school with me, I said, "How did I get the job?" And they said, "Because you're interested in electrical work, the other guys weren't." I've always been interested in electrical stuff. And I was interested in radio. That was when it was coming out, you know.

Interviewer: You were interested already in radio then?

Mr. Thompson: Wasn't a Ham operator, no. But I was interested. In fact, I'd checked into getting a license, but I never did at that time get my license. That was in 1929, in February, and I went to work with AT&T. But I didn't get my Ham license until 1941 after we were married and had children. I finally got the nerve to go up to Washington and take the exam and passed it.

Interviewer: You worked for AT&T for?

Mr. Thompson: I worked for AT&T until '32, in June. Then just before that time the Depression had come on and.

Interviewer: So when the Depression came they let loose a lot of people?

Mr. Thompson: By that time we had about six guys working out there at that time and the Depression came on and they cut out the notice came from the head man up in New York that there'd be no more raises. You see, automatically, we'd get a raise every six months.

Interviewer: So the first move was no more raises.

Mr. Thompson: You'd get \$2 raise. One time my boss said, "I'm going to put you in for a \$3 raise," and I got it. That brought me up to \$25 a week. From then on, no more raises on account of the Depression, but somebody had to work overtime every week, every day, all night long, somebody had to work overtime. But instead of getting paid overtime they gave you time off. You know, time off, free, do what you want and you got paid for it. Instead of getting paid overtime, you couldn't get any more overtime pay so the deal was time off. Sometimes I'd accumulate, say, a week and take off. In the wintertime, nothing to do! But I'd accumulate that time working and then they started cutting off people. I was one of them. They told me two weeks in advance that I'd be relieved of my job on a certain date, but I didn't like it so I went to Richmond and saw the head man. I went down there and saw him. He said there was nothing he could do.

Interviewer: Were you married already?

Mr. Thompson: No.

Interviewer: So then you had to find another job quick? Is that when you went to work for your Dad?

Mr. Thompson: One week after I stopped work with AT&T then, in the meantime I had Metropolitan Life Insurance Company offer me a job. But I didn't like it. And somebody else came and offered me a job. I got to thinking, my mother, too, talking to me about it, said I'm the oldest of the two boys and my brother doesn't seem to have any interest in the business. I'm the oldest; I should take some interest in the business and carry it on. So I thought it over for a whole week and I decided I'd do it.

Interviewer: How did you feel about that?

Mr. Thompson: I thought it was all right. So I told my Daddy that I would come in and start working for him on a certain date, which I did, and I've been working there ever since until I sold the place.

Interviewer: You had to start from scratch. You had not worked.

Mr. Thompson: I'd talked about the business all my life, even when I was a kid. I used to go over there and shovel coal. Back after World War I the boys that were killed in Europe, a lot of them were shipped home. Some of them were shipped down here from Baltimore on the steamboat to Fredericksburg. I went down with my father several

times to get one and put it in the hearse and bring it up to the funeral business.

Interviewer: Would that come in at Sophia?

Mr. Thompson: Come in at the Rappahannock River. Yeah, came in there several times down there.

Interviewer: Was it hard to learn the business, then?

Mr. Thompson: No, no. I'd been thrown with it for years. In fact, my grandfather used to take me around when I was a boy.

Interviewer: What would you do when your grandfather used to take you around?

Mr. Thompson: Different things. One thing he liked to do was take me to his market. In the mornings, five, six o'clock. He'd take me to the market. He'd buy stuff for the house, you know, for that day. He'd take me to the market a lot of times.

Interviewer: You mean the grocery market?

Mrs. Thompson: The outside market.

Mr. Thompson: The market place downtown.

Interviewer: It wasn't things for the funeral business, it was things for his home.

Mr. Thompson: Yes. And I can see my grandfather in the summertime, nice weather, outside reared back in a chair against the telephone pole on the corner of the old building. He would rare back in that thing.

Interviewer: So you were familiar with the business? Have there been a lot of changes in your business over the years, in the funeral director business?

Mr. Thompson: Oh, yeah. In fact, my grandfather's place had three rooms in it. The front was the office, the middle was the display where they had caskets and then the workroom where they did the embalming. And in those days you had to take a casket and it usually came without any lining in it and without any handles on it. And you had to line it and put the handles on the casket. I've done many of

them with my father. I watched my grandfather do it. He'd buy the stuff, the interior, for the caskets in big boxes and different types. I've watched them line many a casket. Put the trimmings inside. Because they came without, except for the most expensive ones. Ordinary ones, which most people bought cheap ones with no handles on it and no trim inside it. And then the old room had things built in the wall that you could like one hanging down, a knob, you take it, pull it out and pull on it and there was a casket in there.

Interviewer: Kind of like a Murphy bed?

Mr. Thompson: When they got the casket new from the manufacturer they'd put this rod on the back side and they'd screw it to it with the arms standing out and they had slots in each door on each side inside and they'd put the casket on there and slide the thing in there, then turn it up and it would hang up there on its own, 'inside. You couldn't see it from the outside. The whole wall was like that.

Interviewer: So it would be like a Murphy bed? Mr. Thompson: Like a Murphy bed, yes. The casket went into the wall like that.

Mrs. Thompson: I never did see that.

Mr. Thompson: I know you didn't. That was torn down before you came here.

Interviewer: Was the business always at the same site downtown?

Mr. Thompson: Yes, as far as I know. In fact, I was born in my grandfather's house and he lived at 701 Caroline St., just one block down from Charlotte Street. That's where they lived when Mommy and Daddy were married and my momma's older sister, she lived there, too, with her husband. She had a daughter first, before I was born.

Mrs. Thompson: ... with the grandparents.

Mr. Thompson: With the grandparents. And while they lived there, after I was born, my grandfather bought two places on Prince Edward St., 1107 and 1109. 1107 was a big house, 1109 was smaller. Of course, my mother's sister being older, she went with my grandmother in the big house. My grandfather told daddy he could have the little house. Daddy said, "Nothing doing." He wanted his own home. So he went down on Caroline Street and bought 208. I was 2 years old when they moved down there. My mother told me years later that they paid

\$3,000 for that house. \$3,000, which back in those days was a lot of money. Down on the railroad daddy was making \$50 a week, no a month! \$50 a month!

Interviewer: They had to save a long time.

Mr. Thompson: My mother took in sewing to help meet the expenses when I was a small boy.

Interviewer: You have probably seen so many changes in Fredericksburg. It was kind of a quiet town for a long time, wasn't it?

Mr. Thompson: Oh, yeah, when I was a boy, I remember the census, I think it was the 1910 census, had 5,000 people here, a little over 5,000. You knew everybody. You could walk up the street and you meet anybody, you knew them by name. Speak to them. Everybody knew everybody. That BPOE building on Caroline Street, the Elks' Lodge, my mother told me one day she was walking between home and the business and she walked on the opposite side of the street from the Elks' Lodge Building? She said two little boys were standing there looking and one of them said to the other one, "I wonder what BPOE stands for?" and the other one said, "I know, Benny Pitts Owns Everything", Benny Pitts, from the theater magnet.

Mrs. Thompson: He owned the theaters. That stood for the Elks' Lodge didn't it, BPOE?

Mr. Thompson: It was the Elks' Lodge

Mr. Thompson: That was after they built the new one down there. Now they're not there anymore, they've sold that.

Interviewer: Did Fredericksburg have dirt streets in those days?

Mr. Thompson: They had dirt streets in those days, but except for Caroline Street and part of William Street, cobblestones. But the rest of the streets were muddy. In fact, they had those things, what do you call those things they put across the streets. Like flagstones. I remember seeing those right across the street from where the funeral home was, on the other side of the street. Princess Anne. You had to walk across those to keep out of the mud!

Interviewer: When did they start concrete and pavement?

Mr. Thompson I don't remember.

Interviewer: But you were there when it happened?

Mr. Thompson: Oh, yeah. I don't remember exactly when they started it.

Mrs. Thompson: I came to college in 1932 and they had streets that were not dusty or anything like that. I remember the dusty roads, but the streets were usually paved.

Mr. Thompson: When I was a boy the streets down there in front of the house on Caroline were muddy and the wagon came down with railroad ties and put them down at the end of the street to put them on barges and haul them away. The wagons would leave ruts in the mud and I went out there one day on the curb and looked in the street and I saw a coin, it looked like. I picked it up. I took the money in the house and cleaned it up the best I could and it was a penny, a great big penny, much bigger than a half a dollar. It had 1801 on it, 1801.

Interviewer: I hope you saved it.

Mr. Thompson: I did, but I couldn't tell you where it is now, 1801, laying right there in the ruts in the street. A colored fellow who worked for my father, he drove horses and when it got to be automobiles he drove a car. We had taxi vendors, too. Taxi vendors along with the funeral business.

Interviewer: Did you do horses originally with the taxi business?

Mr. Thompson: No, I didn't work there when they had the taxi business. But I did drive once in a while. There was a guy who used to come in and date the head of Mary Washington College, State Teacher's College in those days. He used to date her. He'd come to Fredericksburg on the weekends and stay up at the Law Building, had a room up there. And then he'd hire a taxi to go up and see her. I found out about it and when he'd call up, I'd say, "I want to take that one." So I drove him and he always gave a 50-cent tip. 50 cent tip every time!

Interviewer: The taxi service was cars?

Mrs. Thompson: Did you ever have the taxi service when it was horses?

Mr. Thompson: Yes, they had taxis, but it was a horse-drawn taxi. In fact, when my grandfather died we went to his funeral in horse drawn equipment.

Interviewer: Where is your grandfather buried?

Mr. Thompson: In the city cemetery.

Interviewer: And your father, too?

Mr. Thompson: Yes, and my mother.

Interviewer: Now, when your grandparents and your parents died, were you the one who did the embalming and the funeral services?

Mr. Thompson: No, no, I had people working for me. Daddy had somebody working for him.

Interviewer: Now, when your parents died and your grandparents died. Did you do the funeral preparations for your own family?

Mrs. Thompson: Whoever worked for him did.

Mr. Thompson: I don't remember who took care of my grandfather. But when my father died I employed a guy from Richmond, had a funeral home down there. Came up here with some of his men and they took care of everything.

Interviewer: Because it would be too emotional for you? That would be too hard for you?

Mr. Thompson: No, I. couldn't do that, not your own family.

Mrs. Thompson: We always got somebody else to handle it.

Interviewer: You must have had many people that you knew come through the funeral parlor. Was that how did that feel?

Mr. Thompson: I don't know. It was just another case, I reckon. You get hard to it, you get used to it.

Mrs. Thompson: You have to handle it that way. I had to learn.

Mr. Thompson: I'd been associated with it so long, it just didn't bother me one bit. Grew up in it, practically. See the business had been in my family some 130 years when I sold it. A man named Charles Williams started the business. How he got married in the family, I don't know, but anyway, my grandfather's father came over from England with several brothers and the brothers decided they'd go back. So they went back and my grandfather stayed here.

Interviewer: He's the only one who stayed? And they came to Fredericksburg?

Mr. Thompson: Yeah. The brothers went to England. We took a trip over there a few years ago. Went to London. The first thing I did was grab a phone book and look. Wheeler after Wheeler! The telephone book is so big and they had three of them to take care of the alphabet! Three books, thick books. In fact, I asked the bus driver one day about Wheeler and he said, "That's a common name over here."

Interviewer: So you never found any of your relatives?

Mr. Thompson: No. I saw Wheeler on one business in London while we were driving around.

Mrs. Thompson: Now, his father's family is from Virginia. Thompson was from Virginia, own at Beaverdam, Virginia.

Interviewer: Mr. Williams started the business and then

Mr. Thompson: Mr. Williams was an uncle of my grandfather, so they got together and formed Williams and Wheeler. And then Williams died and my grandfather had the business by himself and he called it E.K. Wheeler. Then when he took my father in partnership with him, Wheeler and Thompson.

Interviewer: So that goes back a long way. And none of your children were interested in the family business.

Mr. Thompson: No. Nobody, my brother had two boys. The oldest boy went to the University of Richmond and graduated. He decided one day he wanted to come into the business, so I said, "That's fine, he's part of the family." So he went to work for Bliley's in Richmond, the big outfit. He served a year apprenticeship; you have to serve for two years, then go to embalming school, then go to the State Board for an examination and then you get your license.

Interviewer: Let me get this down. You serve two years like an apprentice, then you have to go to embalming school after the two years and then you take the exam. And how long is embalming school?

Mr. Thompson: When my father went it was three months. When I went it was six months, but while I was in school they changed it to nine. So I had to go the full nine to get everything I needed for the State Boards. When the licenses were first issued my father could have gotten his license as an embalmer - they gave them. But he said, "No, sir," he wanted to work for it. And then they put in the rule that you had to go three months to embalming school and take the examination and pass it. That's what he did; he didn't want anybody to give him anything! (Laughs)

Interviewer: What happened when your nephew started working in Richmond?

Interviewer: Did he ever stay in the business?

Mr. Thompson: No, he quit. Finally he got a job with the State Highway Department. He's still with them as far as I know.

Mrs. Thompson: I think his father thought that he would.

Interviewer: It would be nice if he'd stayed in the business. That would have been nice for you to have the business carry on in the family.

(Interviewer indicates the end of the interview, but tape begins again) Nancy, there is some sort of break here. I am not sure what to do. Mr. Thompson: In the old days. Tolls. You had to pay a toll to get out of town. Every road had a toll on it.

Interviewer: And they were dirt roads anyway?

Mr. Thompson: Dirt roads. They only had the Falmouth Bridge road north, the William Street Bridge, and Route 2 going down by the County Club and old Number 1 going down by the National Cemetery down the hill around the curve (William Street)? That's the only roads we had in those days. And there was a toll on every one of them. You couldn't get out of town without paying the toll.

Interviewer: How much was the toll?

Mr. Thompson: I don't remember. Richmond had three tollgates. After they finally did away with the toll, that William Street Bridge was a two-land bridge, girders, became know as the Free Bridge. It was known as the Free Bridge for years until they put in the concrete bridge that's there now.

Mrs. Thompson: Evidently, if a man would keep the road going he could charge for people to go over it.

Mr. Thompson: We kids had a place to cross the road over there, you know where, you go across the river and turn left, and go over underneath the railroad—Leeland Road. Over there by Earl's, Earl's Market. We had a place down there on the other side of the underpass of the railroad with concrete walls and a little dam and we kids used to go over there and go swimming in it. We had to pay six cents to go over across the bridge to get over there on the bicycle! Another thing I want to tell you about. We used to have a show that came to Fredericksburg every year at the end of summer. The Chautauqua.

The date changes here Interview #2, August 13, 1998

Interviewer: Let's talk about the old days a little bit. You started yesterday to tell me some interesting things and I said you'd have to wait until I put the new tape in.

Mr. Thompson: You remember I mentioned the William Street Bridge had a toll on it? After the toll came off it became known as the Free Bridge. There was an island underneath the bridge. They made that into what they call Pleasure Island. They built a stairway from the bridge down to the ground and it used to be a big thing called it Pleasure Island.

Interviewer: What would you do for pleasure there?

Mr. Thompson: Different things. Games, I can't remember it's been so long ago. But on Saturday night it would be a bad night. There'd be a fight, a shooting.

Interviewer: Regularly, or just sometimes?

Mr. Thompson: It's been so long ago, I can't remember. I remember I was on that island several times. They built a stairway, framework that went from the side of the bridge down onto the island. It was closer to the Fredericksburg side than Stafford, the island is. Used to have big

entertainment there, a shooting gallery, dancing. I can't remember what all. Anything for pleasure was out on that island for several years and then they finally closed it up.

Interviewer: That leads me to a couple of things. We could talk about - what did you do for your vacations?

Mr. Thompson: Vacations? We didn't have any!

Interviewer: Never?

Mr. Thompson: No!

Interviewer: Did you have vacations from school?

Mr. Thompson: Oh, yeah, summer, every summer.

Interviewer: What did you do in the summer when you were little?

Mr. Thompson: Went swimming, mostly. We played games. We had bicycles in those days. I remember there was one guy in town had a cycle, he called it a motor—had a motor built into the front wheel. He had a place down on Kings Highway, about 10 miles. One of the fellows in our group lived down there on a farm and several of us guys went down there on our bicycles plus that guy who had the cycle with the motor in the front wheel. We went down there and played in his barn and had a lot of fun. Fellow named Graves.

Interviewer: You said you had family in Beaverdam.

Mr. Thompson: That was my father's mother and father.

Interviewer: So yesterday we talked a lot about the Wheeler side of your family, but we didn't talk about the Beaverdam side.

Mr. Thompson: My father had an older brother named Sam that I never knew. He died before I was born.

Interviewer: What did he die of? Mr. Thompson: He was a railroad engineer. They said he died of consumption, that's what they called it.

Interviewer: TB?

Mr. Thompson: Yeah. But he was a railroad engineer and he belonged to the Masonic Lodge and they kept his ring and they gave it to me when I joined the Masonic Lodge years ago.

Interviewer: That was here in Fredericksburg?

Mr. Thompson: Yes, the lodge in Fredericksburg. But where he belonged to the lodge I don't know. But he was a member of the lodge and they kept his ring after he died and when I joined the Masonic Lodge it was given to me.

Interviewer: How many members of your family were there at Beaverdam?

Mr. Thompson: There was Uncle Sam, the next one was Uncle Burke, then my father, Harry, and then Kate, sister. I understand she was a twin, but her brother died when he was a baby. But she was a twin. Uncle Harry was killed in Richmond by an automobile. My grandfather at that time had a country store. He sold everything. Big store, two stories, and it was joined to the house by a walkway of wood with a roof over it. Over off the side there was what grandma called a dairy house. You'd go in the door and go down the steps and there was a concrete trough in there. Then they'd arrange for water to come in from the pump. When you wanted water to keep the butter and cream and stuff cool, we had a thing like a pipe hooked onto the pump that went down in there. Many times I put water in there for my grandmother. She'd drain it every once in a while and put in fresh water.

Interviewer: So the things you wanted to keep cold were on the concrete floor and then you'd pour cold water on top of it?

Mr. Thompson: We just pumped it out of the pump and it went down under the floor of the building and into this concrete trough where you put your butter and milk and everything to keep it cool. That was called a dairy house. Also they had a churn to make the butter. I did that many a time. The old kind you pushed. It was like a baby carriage, on a swing-like. My brother would get on one end and I'd get on the other and we'd do this thing and churn it. Then they had a bowl underneath that and you'd pull it out and let it drain out, scoop in there and get the butter. So I watched them do that any times when I was a kid.

Interviewer: Well if both of you were working on it, it probably didn't take very long.

Mr. Thompson: Didn't take too long. Churn it; they called it, made good butter.

Interviewer: Now that was your grandpa, and he had the country store, two stories.

Mr. Thompson: Two stories, big building. And he sold everything. One day he bought new counters for the store and on the front was a place you could put a sample of what was in that cabinet or drawer. He really had a nice store there.

Interviewer: What was the name of the store?

Mr. Thompson: Thompson's. John Lewis Thompson. He was a Civil War veteran.

Interviewer: He was a Civil War veteran?

Mr. Thompson: Yes, and he lost his right arm during the war. His arm was gone from his elbow and he had to learn to write all over again after the war was over. He got married, settled out in Beaverdam.

Interviewer: Do you know what battalion he was in or anything, what division?

Mr. Thompson: He was in the auxiliary, that's all I know. His name is on the monument down in Hanover Courthouse. There's a monument for Civil War veterans and his name is on there under some volunteers and they've got a checkmark by his name and underneath it says, "wounded". He had his right arm shot off.

Interviewer: And his full name was what?

Mr. Thompson: John Lewis Thompson.

Interviewer: And he lost it here in this battle of Fredericksburg?

Mr. Thompson: Somewhere around here. I remember when I was a boy my father went over to Beaverdam and got him and took him around the old battlefields around here to see if he could remember

anything. And some of the things he couldn't even remember, it had changed so during the years.

Interviewer: Do they still have that store?

Mr. Thompson: No, it's all fallen in. They cleaned it up and there's nothing left of it. Nothing left of the house, hardly. It's all caved in. That was a big house, built quite a ways off the ground, steps go up to the front porch all the way across the front, big hall all the way through the middle of the house, big rooms on each side, upstairs and down. They had a big house.

Interviewer: Did everyone just move away?

Mr. Thompson: They just died out. And when I was growing up, during World War I, there were two guys who were mail carriers from the post office over there in Beaverdam. They had a room in my grandmother's house. They just rented it. Stayed there for years. One was from Montpelier, VA, named Thompson. But he wasn't any kin to us. Victor Thompson. The other guy was named Grayson Burruss. I don't know where he was from. But those two carried mail and when World War I started they both went to Europe and fought. They survived and when they both came home they resumed their jobs as mail carriers for the post office out at Beaverdam.

Interviewer: Tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in here in Fredericksburg.

Mr. Thompson: Down on Caroline Street? I know the house, we lived at 208, 206 was a big house that my boy owns now. That was used as a hospital and between that house and our house was a small like a barn. I remember when that was torn down and they found several old coins there, pennies and whatnot. There was quite a few of them found around that old building. And in the back yard of our place we found a vault built in the ground. My mother called my brother and I one day and she was hollering. A hole had developed in the back, in the ground. So my brother and I got flashlights and looked in there and we started digging and making it bigger so we could look inside. When we could see inside we saw a perfect vault, built like to bury somebody. The sides of the walls were just straight, we didn't know what it was for, so we put everything we could find it and just filled it up.

Interviewer: Was there anything in the vault?

Mr. Thompson: Nothing, absolutely nothing. The earth was so thick on top of it, it's a wonder it hadn't caved in before. That was a perfect vault. We never did find out what it was for. Of course, it could have been connected with the so-called hospital next door to bury somebody.

Interviewer: Or maybe somebody wanted to hide things during the war.

Mr. Thompson: (Laughs).

Mrs. Thompson: Well, they were likely to do that if they were coming. The soldiers, it happened in Spotsylvania County.

Interviewer: You started to tell me about the man next door, Mr. Braxton.

Mr. Thompson: Mr. Braxton was overseas for years. I never even knew him until I was a good-sized boy because he never came home. He just traveled all over the world. He was a tobacco salesman.

Interviewer: Where did he live from you?

Mr. Thompson: 206 Caroline, the one that used to be the hospital in the Civil War. He and three sisters lived there. They were old maids, they never married. He traveled all over. Finally he retired and came home. That's when I met him. He was an elderly man then. After he came home he finally settled down and became one of the big shots of Fredericksburg Savings and Loan and married a widower. She had a daughter. He married her and they had no children because he was pretty old when they got married. But he had all kinds of money.

Interviewer: Tell me about when you went to school, what school was like?

Mr. Thompson: I went to where the library is on Caroline Street? That was the old elementary school. That's where I went for seven years. I left there and went to James Monroe. Graduated from James Monroe and then I went to VPI for two years.

Interviewer: Did you work every summer?

Mr. Thompson: Oh, yeah. I'd do different jobs. My father would help me get a job sometimes. I helped to build the road from the north end

of Falmouth to Stafford Courthouse. I worked on that road with a pick and shovel gang. When you went into Falmouth and go by the Baptist Church, the road didn't go any further, it just went up this hill on over to Crane's Corner and on up through Garrisonville and on up to Stafford Courthouse, which is a long way. This was just dirt, muddy road right from the end of Falmouth into Stafford Courthouse. So they finally decided to put the main road there. I worked for the contractor to build that road, concrete road. It was hard work, pick and shovel gang. Pick up the dirt and throw it in the wagon or truck. It was hard work. I remember one time on that job, the boss came at me to go down and get supplies. One of the trucks we used was a World War I truck, called them quads. They had solid wheels and solid tires on them. One of the axles had broken on one of them and he asked me to go down and get an axle out of a pile of supplies they had and bring it up so they could put it on the truck. I went down there and saw the axle and tried to pick it up. I couldn't even budge it! It was so heavy! One of the other guys saw me and he said, "What do you want?" I told him, "So-and-so wants me to bring one of the axles down there and put it on the truck." He said, "Sure, I'll bring it down for you." He reached down and picked it up like it was nothing, puts it on his shoulder and walks on down with it and puts it where it's supposed to be. But I couldn't even budge it off the ground! This man picks it up off the ground with both hands and puts it up on his shoulder. He was a regular with that outfit. He was strong! I felt awful.

Interviewer: In those days, what were race relations like in Fredericksburg? Did black people work alongside you on the gangs?

Mr. Thompson: Black people? It was segregated. Even the railroad station was segregated. It had a waiting room for the white people and one on the other end of the building for the black people. When you got on the railroad train they had separate sections of the car that black people sat in.

Interviewer: Even on these jobs like that, laying streets? It would still be segregated?

Mr. Thompson: I don't remember that.

Mrs. Thompson: Do you remember working with any black people when you were working on the road?

Mr. Thompson: No. I think it was all white people I worked with?

Interviewer: There was no mingling of the races, no social anything here?

Mr. Thompson: No. The blacks were the blacks and the whites were the whites. Totally different people.

Interviewer: When you talked about your grandfather and his Civil War experiences, did he used to talk to you about them? Did you ask your grandfather?

Mr. Thompson: No. I've heard him say, though, that he was With Stonewall Jackson when Jackson was shot by his own men? He was with him. I've heard him say that. He said he heard General Jackson give the orders. They were going around a certain section of this church, building, or whatever, and he said, "The first one that comes over there, shoot at him!" And he was the first one, and they shot him. I heard my grandpa say that.

Interviewer: That would be something you wouldn't forget. So he didn't talk about experiences.

Mr. Thompson: He didn't talk much about the experiences of the war, never did. Not that I know of.

Interviewer: Your father did not have to go to World War I?

Mr. Thompson: No. He was excused. He was a funeral director in Fredericksburg and he was excused. When World War I ended I was 13 years old. So I knew pretty well what had been going on. We didn't get into the war until 1917 even though it started in Europe in 1914. We didn't get into it until 1917.

Interviewer: Were there changes in Fredericksburg; were there shortages during the war that you can remember?

Mr. Thompson: Shortages? Oh, yeah. Sugar was short. Daddy would get a great big bag of sugar and he would put it in the room we had for the colored woman who took care of us when we were little, we called it Sarah's room. Sarah's room, that's where she stayed, and we used it after that for a storage room. He put it in there to keep it. He was able to get it somehow, I don't remember, but a great big bag full of sugar.

Interviewer: But other things didn't change too much for Fredericksburg?

Mr. Thompson: There was tightness on everything, yeah. I can't remember too much about World War I. I was about 9 years old when it started.