ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

CHERYL BROWN HENDERSON THE VILLAGES, FLORIDA APRIL 2, 2020

INTERVIEWED BY DEBORAH HARVEY

AUDIO FILE #BRVB040220 – CHERYL HENDERSON

# EDITORIAL NOTE

This document is a rendering of the oral history interview as transcribed by the interviewer from the audio recording. Although effort was made to provide a verbatim transcription, for easier reading of the transcript, verbal pauses, repetitions of words, and encouraging words from the interviewer were omitted. The resulting oral history interview transcript was provided to the informant for review and, if necessary, correction. Ms. Henderson made significant modifications to the draft transcript for the purpose of clarifying and expanding responses to questions. For the original interview, please refer to the audio file.

# ABSTRACT

Ms. Cheryl Brown Henderson begins by describing the events surrounding the establishment of the Brown Foundation and the work of the Brown Foundation in getting the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site established. She describes extensively the educational activities of the Brown Foundation on behalf of the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site after its establishment as a unit of the National Park System. Ms. Henderson describes the efforts and outcome of the oral history project initiated by the Brown Foundation. She discusses at length her tenure as Superintendent of the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, why she left that position, and the aftermath of her departure.

# PERSONS MENTIONED

Jerry Jones, Oliver Brown, Senator Bob Dole, Congressman John Lewis, Senator Ted Kennedy, Senator [Nancy] Kassebaum, Governor Mike Hayden, Linda Todd, Bill Cosby, Congressman Dan Glickman, Dr. [Harry] Butowsky, Bob DeForrest, [Deborah] Dandridge, Linda Rosenblum, President [George W.] Bush, John Kerry, Treva Sykes.

# ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

**CHERYL BROWN HENDERSON**

Interviewer: This oral history interview is for the Administrative History of Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site in Topeka, Kansas. The interviewer is Deborah Harvey, with Outside The Box, on behalf of the Midwest Regional Office of the National Park Service. Interviewed today is Cheryl Brown Henderson, founder and former president of the Brown Foundation in Topeka, Kansas, and –

Henderson: The Brown Foundation is still a going concern and I continue to serve as its founding president.

Interviewer: Oh, you’re still the president. Okay, I apologize. I was unaware of that. Also, the former park superintendent at Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. The date is April 2, 2020. This interview is being conducted by telephone. So, the first thing I need for you to do is repeat your name and spell your last name.

Henderson: Okay. My name is Cheryl Brown Henderson

Interviewer: Well, I think perhaps your first name would be useful, since Cheryl is not always spelled the same way.

Henderson: That’s true. Here is the pronunciation and spelling of my name Cheryl Brown Henderson, C-H-E-R-Y-L, Brown, B-R-O-W-N, Henderson, H-E-N-D-E-R-S-O-N.

Interviewer: Okay. So, the next thing I’m going to do is stop the recording and check to make sure that this recording device has picked us up because we’re doing this by telephone.

Henderson: Okay.

(Recording stopped, then re-started)

Interviewer: Okay. So, now we are going to record again. So, Cheryl, first I would like to discuss your relationship and the beginnings of the Brown Foundation. And, if you could briefly summarize the – your role in establishing the Brown Foundation and its purpose?

Henderson: The Foundation was established in 1988 to serve as a living tribute to the attorneys, community organizers, and plaintiffs who were part of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*. Our purpose is to preserve and interpret the history of the Brown decision for present and future generations. I was encouraged to establish the Brown Foundation by a co-worker, named Jerry Jones, while working for the Kansas State Department of Education. He was surprised to learn that Topeka did not recognize or commemorate this historic milestone and pointedly said If *Brown v.*

*Board* is not being recognized in Topeka, “Isn’t that your responsibility?” His words became the catalyst.

Interviewer: Okay. And how many members are there?

Henderson: We’re not a member organization. We are a nonprofit educational foundation governed by a Board of Directors.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. So, you have a Board of Directors, and you are the president, correct?

Henderson: My role is that of Founding President. Our Board of Directors is managed by elected officers – a Board Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer. Board members also chair various committees.

Interviewer: Okay. So, were you and the Brown Foundation involved in getting Brown v. Board of Education park established?

Henderson: The Brown Foundation was the progenitor of Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. As Foundation President and daughter of case namesake Oliver Brown, I took the lead in working with the Department of the Interior, the Trust for Public Lands, the Kansas Congressional delegation, and several members of Congress representing other states who had an interest in preserving the history of *Brown v. Board of Education*. I was already experienced with lobbying and writing federal legislation during my time as chair of The National Displaced Homemakers Network, an organization that worked to secure educational and employment opportunities for women who were divorced, widowed, or had a disabled spouse. I had already testified before Congress on behalf the organization and, at the time of working on the *Brown v. Board* legislation, in addition to the Brown Foundation, I was a contract lobbyist with The Westerly Group, headed by the former Finance Director for Senator Bob Dole. This work required me to be in Washington, D.C. and on “the Hill”, a few days each month, so I knew how things worked for getting legislation passed. I was honored that the late Congressman John Lewis and the late Senator Ted Kennedy were among our supporters. Congressman Lewis joined me in testifying before the House Committee that oversees National Parks. He was also a member of the committee, and we hosted him in Topeka to tour the old Monroe Elementary School building. We also hosted Senator Dole and Senator Kassebaum, to view the property. The other Kansas connection was former Kansas Governor Mike Hayden. During our work on this site, he was the Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish, Wildlife and Parks. His first trip back to Kansas was at our invitation to hold a press conference announcing the prospect of making the old Monroe Elementary School building a National Historic Site.

Interviewer: So, were you intent on establishing Monroe School or Sumner School? Were you involved with that school?

Henderson: There are sixteen sites in Topeka that are associated with the *Brown v. Board*, so we had a menu of possibilities. The case involved eight of the eighteen segregated elementary schools for white children and the four segregated elementary schools for African American children. In addition, other sites included the home of Lucinda Todd, who was one of the case strategists and secretary of the NAACP at the time. Planning meetings about their legal action were often held at her home. Another site is the post office on

4th and Kansas Avenue which housed the federal courtroom where *Brown v. Board* was litigated. Our principle concern was saving the Monroe Elementary School building because it was privately owned and scheduled to be sold at auction. The other associated sites were not endangered at that time. Our concern was that if the building was sold at auction, it could very well be demolished.

Interviewer: Torn down?

Henderson: Yes – so, of the sixteen local sites associated with *Brown v. Board*, it was the only one that was in jeopardy.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. Okay. It was in immediate jeopardy, basically? Henderson: Right.

Interviewer: Okay. So, could you give me some sort of a timeline of what you did to get this – to get the park established?

Henderson: There is a preservation timeline on our website. All the information is there. It was a very lengthy process beginning with my being contacted by Board member and co- worker, Jerry Jones, who became aware of the impending auction. We initially wrote to various philanthropists hoping one of them purchase the building for our use.

Interviewer: Okay. So, you were – you were raising funds?

Henderson: Ironically the only reply came from Bill Cosby, whose staff said he wasn’t really interested in owning an old building. Afterwards, we decided that, since *Brown v. Board* is a significant part of U.S. history, we were going about it all wrong. We should be contacting our Congressional Representatives. Next, I wrote letters to members of the Kansas Congressional delegation. The first person to respond was Congressman Dan Glickman, from Wichita, Kansas. After that, we were able to get the full delegation on board with what we were trying to do. It was a very lengthy process just in terms of getting all possible stakeholders involved. I reached out to the following stakeholders - The Monroe Neighborhood Improvement Association, Historic Topeka, the State Historical Society, Congressional delegation, the Mayor of Topeka – oh, Dr. Butowsky, who we met in 1987 while he was writing a Constitutional Theme Study, and Bob DeForrest, whose Washington, D.C. based organization had identified numerous historic properties connected to the African American experience. I later learned about and contacted The Trust for Public Lands and was invited to join the Board of Advisors of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

*(The following additional information was provided to interviewer in email dated September 2, 2020) Hopefully, when you and I spoke, I recounted how one of my (Brown Foundation) board members, Jerry Jones, discovered that Monroe school building was going to be sold at auction. He called me, one evening after work, about the pending auction and he suggested that we find a way to save it. Several months earlier I had driven him past the building and explained its relationship to our family. My mother was among the first students to attend Monroe when it was newly constructed in 1926. My sisters both attended Monroe Elementary, my eldest sister’s children attended Monroe Elementary, and I taught*

*sixth grade at Monroe Elementary just before the local board of education closed the school because of declining enrollment. My sisters also attended McKinley Elementary School, one of the other schools segregated for African American children. My middle sister and I attended Grant Elementary School, which was then an integrated school post* Brown*. And 1961, after my father died, we returned to Topeka, and I attended Sumner Elementary School, which was integrated post Brown. From there he [Jones] and I wrote letters to various philanthropists asking for their help. We received only one courtesy reply but no takers. At our next brainstorming session, we decided that, since this was U.S. history, we should contact our congressional representatives. The first respondent was Congressman Dan Glickman from Wichita, Kansas. He introduced me to Bob Deforrest's nonprofit, located in Washington, D.C., because this entity had put together a pamphlet of African American landmarks across the nation. Bob Deforrest contacted his friend at the NPS, Harry Butowsky, who, ironically, I had notified about his Constitutional Theme Study. It was important because his research had overlooked Monroe School and other sites in Topeka.*

Interviewer: Okay, so, you, basically, assembled a consortium of stakeholders in this effort?

Henderson: Well, I don’t know if I would put it that way, because everybody was somewhat independent, even though we had to find out what their criteria was in order to work with them independently. For example, we needed to find out the requirements of the National Park Service Foundation or their Board in order to pursue designation for the Monroe School building to receive National Historic Landmark status, and then, once that happened, getting the Trust for Public Lands to hold the building in trust so the owner would be assured of a sale while we worked on the legislation – I actually wrote the first draft of the legislation using a template from other sites, then worked with the Congressional staff on getting it turned into the kind of language they use for federal bills. I also testified before, both for the House and the Senate. It took, all total, fourteen years from start to finish because once the legislation passed – and that was rather dicey because it was introduced on the House side, and I went in to testify along with Congressman John Lewis before the committee, and then it was introduced on the Senate side and I testified along with Senator Dole. And then, before the bill was voted on, the Senate went on their August recess. So, we were worried we’d lose a year, if it didn’t pass, and so I urged Senator Dole to help get the lone dissenter on board since legislation can pass when Congress is not in session through a process called “unanimous consent”. However, it only takes one dissenter to sabotage and delay the passing of legislation while Congress is on recess. So, Senator Dole was able to get the dissenter on board, and the bill to establish Brown v. Board of Education National Historic site passed in the fall of ’92. But, once it passed – I mean, that was only the beginning. We had to secure an appropriation, and then work with the National Park Service itself on all the requisite documents. Let’s see, this effort was started in 1990, and the historic site did not open until 2004. Once the site was completed and open to the public The Brown Foundation was provided office space at the site and worked on public programming for seven years until 2011. It was also our role to assist with NPS staff orientation and to help the site become a viable entity for the community and for the country.

Interviewer: Okay. So, did you, at any time – did the Brown Foundation make any attempts to do any restoration or preservation at the Monroe School?

Henderson: Well, once the NPS teams were assembled to develop the various studies and reports, we were on each of those teams.

Interviewer: Okay, so you were on all of the teams, like the –? Henderson: We were.

Interviewer: Okay, but, as a – as a Foundation, you did not, before it became a National Park, attempt to do any restoration?

Henderson: We did not attempt to engage in restoration on our own. After we failed to raise funds to acquire the building and then began working with our Congressional delegation the intent became to create a National Historic Site that would be a unit of the National Park Service.

Interviewer: Okay. The National Park Service refers to the Brown – the involvement of the Brown Foundation as foundational to the establishment of the park, and I – as I understand it, you signed a cooperative agreement – the Brown Foundation signed a cooperative agreement – a cooperative agreement with the National Park Service. What were your – what were your responsibilities under that agreement?

Henderson: Well, the NPS Regional Office asked us to enter into this partnership with them so that we could continue being available and could be represented on the planning teams, so, basically, that agreement allowed us to have resources for a small staff and enabled us to attend all of the meetings and to have the time to work on various NPS documents. And, boy! There was a lot of reading involved! I recognized early on that it was crucial to read everything in order to make sure there was accuracy. It was necessary to ensure a balanced portrayal of all people. For example, it was important to depict slaveholders murdering large numbers of enslaved people by using the term massacre as opposed to only when white slaveholders were killed. For instance, in the case of Nat Turner, when he led a revolt and killed slaveholders, it was characterized as a “massacre”, but seldom was the same terminology used when the victims were enslaved people. I wanted to make sure that the terminology was always fair and equal and descriptive. And there were a lot of nuances. So, I’d have to make sure every – literally, every document was reviewed, cover to cover.

Interviewer: Okay. And did you – were you satisfied with the terms of the cooperative agreement, or did you think they should have been different in some – any way?

Henderson: The initial cooperative agreement was geared to the planning process for establishing the historic site. Additional years of the agreement were focused more on developing public programs and educational resources.

Interviewer: Okay. So, did you have any particular plans for your alliance with the National Park Service that you expected to –?

Henderson: Well, it was pretty cut and dried. I mean, in order to move forward with steps that needed to be taken for historic site development as outlined by the Park Service – so, what we provided was knowledge of the story and the various stakeholders around the country that should be consulted and involved. During this part of site development our role was pretty clear cut.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you happen to recall what the relationship between Brown v. Board and the Nicodemus National Historic Site was when the park first opened?

Henderson: Well, there was not a relationship. The community of Nicodemus had been working to establish the city as an historic site before we started. There was no formal or informal relationship that I was aware of.

Interviewer: Okay. So, you attended the Interpretive Themes Workshop in 1993. I think that was probably one –

Henderson: We attended every workshop, every planning meeting, you name it. We were there (laughter).

Interviewer: Okay. What were your expectations for that workshop? Do you recall?

Henderson: By the time we got to the point of interpretive themes, we were well into the development of the site. The formal process begins with the Suitability/Feasibility Study that leads to legislation, and then, from there, we worked on getting the designation for the building as a Landmark, and then, from there, the various studies on the historic building itself, the Historic Buildings Survey, and then historic furnishings and then the archeology of the area to make sure that there were no contaminants below ground that could affect the integrity of the site. There was also a study to survey for the presence of asbestos in order to have it abated. So, by the time we got to interpretive themes, we were well underway on what the building would be used for and how the exhibits would develop and what the story would be – how we could tell the story.

Interviewer: Okay. Were you pleased with the results of the Interpretive Themes workshop?

Henderson: The teams we worked on, at that point, with the interpretive process, were very accommodating to those of us who connected to this history. Because of that, we were able to help develop a visitor experience that placed the story of *Brown* in the context of the African American experience in the United States. Once the story was shared with the design fabrication teams, the question became how to take the bits and pieces and turn them into something we could interpret through exhibits and through narration for the general public.

Interviewer: Okay. And did you – were you happy with the results of that?

Henderson: Well, I mean, it was our story! (Laughs) So, the only way we could have not been happy is if we’d made a mistake, which we did not (laughter). So, the NPS used us as a sounding board for exhibit content. We had already created a traveling exhibit about *Brown v. Board* that the Park Service used in its temporary offices down at the old Post Office. We had experience with creating exhibits to share the history of *Brown v. Board*.

Interviewer: Okay. So, you were happy with the exhibits that were created to interpret the –?

Henderson: We consider them our exhibits. I mean, we helped create them. The NPS team working on the exhibit content and the contractors who were charged with fabricating the exhibits were accommodating in allowing our input.

Interviewer: Okay. And also, the General Management Plan? You were on that team as well, obviously, and what were your expectations for the General Management Plan?

Henderson: Yes, we were involved in the general management plan. As you read that plan, you’ll see that it includes background on the history of *Brown v. Board* and the companion cases. At the end of the day, we took our responsibility seriously, because we got ourselves into this, we made sure we guided the process as much as we could. And Dr. Butowsky, who was an historian on that team, was someone that I forged a friendship with. With his ear we were able to be very engaged in the dialog. We also brought on Ms. Dandridge. She wasn’t on the Management Plan team. I think she came later. We recognized that we needed to have people that were professional historians in the field of African American history. It was crucial us to see this project to its conclusion. The Park Service cooperative agreement enabled us to be on the teams without having to worry about other responsibilities – we could devote ourselves one hundred percent to developing the site – we were all-in. Most of the staff were very gracious and understood we were putting in the work to ensure an outcome we had hoped it to be, and what our Congressional delegation, who supported us, hoped it would be.

Interviewer: Okay. And did you get to help pick the people that were on the General Management Plan team?

Henderson: Did we what?

Interviewer: Did you get to help pick the people or groups that were on the General Management team?

Henderson: Not NPS staff - the people that were on our team from the Brown Foundation – including a Constitutional lawyer, who was on our Board for example. He was immensely helpful. We never needed to go outside of our own Board for people to help with interpretive content.

Interviewer: Okay, we – when I was looking at the list of people who were attending – I think it might have been the Interpretive – the Thematic –Interpretive Themes Workshop, there was a contingent of, I think it was, a fraternity or a sorority. Do you happen to remember them?

Henderson: (Laughs) No! I’m laughing because – no, I have no idea where that came from!

Interviewer: Oh, okay. Well, it was on the list of people who were – who were attending the workshop, and I was curious as to how they managed to be part of the team (laughs).

Henderson: (Laughs) Well, you know, I’m not convinced that they did. The list you saw may have been someone’s brainstorming ideas but that did not materialize.

Interviewer: Okay. Alright. Well, that’s interesting. I haven’t been able to find anybody else who could recall that, either, so (laughs). (Pause) What would you say was the attitude or impression that the – that the neighborhood – the public had of the park when it was first established?

Henderson: We worked with the Monroe Neighborhood Improvement Association, so they were part of our initial team of stakeholders. It was during the time of working on getting the Landmark designation. We were able to meet with them to explain what we were trying to do, so they were always on board.

Interviewer: Okay. Was there any concern in the community about how long it was taking for the park to get open? The – did they know that there were all these studies and stuff?

Henderson: No, I think the concern was more those of us on the inside, and it wasn’t concern. It was simply doing the work. No, I didn’t get that impression.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you have a preferred alternative for the final General Management Plan, personally?

Henderson: No.

Interviewer: No? Just – what came out of it was – you were okay with that?

Henderson: We were there. (Laughs) That could only have been said had we not been sitting in the room and had we not been part of the discussion.

Interviewer: Right. Well, sometimes, you know, a General Management Plan has several alternative actions, and, sometimes, there –

Henderson: Well, I realize that, but we were there making sure, everybody was on board with the alternative that was selected, including us.

Interviewer: Okay. So, as I understand it, you produced educational and interpretive programs and materials for the park. Is that correct?

Henderson: After the site opened, we met with the Superintendent to discuss “What will we do now?” You know, “Now that we have our exhibits installed, and now that the site is open to the public”. Going back in time for a minute, I wanted to share the tragedy we experienced during the selection process for contractors to develop exhibits. One of the groups that submitted a proposal lost staff members in terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Once that happened, the RFP for design and fabrication of exhibits had to be reissued requiring us to reconvene at Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia, for another round of proposal review to select a consortium of contractors. In order to consolidate things, because we were running out of time to complete the site by the 50th anniversary of the *Brown* decision, there needed to be a group, like a consortium – I’ll borrow your word – that would design and fabricate the exhibits and produce the videos.

Interviewer: Well, you know, I – my experience with the Park Service has been that a lot of things are very involved. Other than the exhibits, did you produce, like, study guides for schools?

Henderson: Oh, that’s what I was going to say. Yes, once the exhibits were installed, and we had our official opening in 2004, it was agreed that we would then be responsible for public programs, etcetera. Working with NPS staff at the site, we developed a program committee to plan and host monthly programs for the general public To create awareness of the program schedule, we published a booklet that we’d send out to the community and the news media to let them know what programs and events would be taking place at the site. We would design and publish a book of twelve programs each year, and then we sent out reminder postcards so people could register for the programs. We’d use that information to figure out seating and sound and all logistics.

Some of the programs were in the evening. Some were during the day and consisted of concerts, speakers, traveling exhibits. Our Foundation, as a nonprofit, also raised funds that we used to keep program activity in place whenever Congress had not passed a budget, and the government was operating under a continuing resolution. Funds we raised were also used to provide field trip grants for school districts across the state to pay for buses to bring their students to the site. We also awarded scholarships for postsecondary education and mini grants for school groups working on projects related to social justice.

Interviewer: Were they in different places? Henderson: Pardon?

Interviewer: Were they in different places or were they all at the park?

Henderson: Oh, no. They were always at the site - concerts, and speakers, and movies, and an array of things. The only exception was our annual commemoration of the anniversaries of court’s decision in *Brown.* Another exception was that Washburn University had instituted an annual lecture series named for my father – The Oliver L. Brown Visiting Scholar for Diversity Issues.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. And what about – oh, what do you call those things? Classroom study guides that you give to teachers to tell a story?

Henderson: Our first curriculum kit was developed in the ‘90s. But let me explain this - while we were working on the various NPS planning teams, we were also developing resources – our traveling exhibit, for example. And then our first curriculum kit, which contains a video and a teachers’ guide – those resources were developed prior to the historic site opening. Then, once the site opened, we began convening monthly public programs.

Interviewer: So, that was after 2004?

Henderson: Before 2004, we had already developed our traveling exhibit and our first curriculum kit, and primary grade activity booklets. Once the site opened, we began development on another curriculum kit for primary grades. To create awareness of the educational resources, we would set up at different history conferences around the country. At our conference booths, teachers could sign up to receive our curriculum. We also published a curriculum newsletter called “The Brown Quarterly,” that was distributed four times a year. The “Quarterly” had a subscription database of about a three thousand teachers

and media specialists – librarians – across the country and a couple of places outside of the U.S. Information about the educational resources is on our website. You can look at the old newsletters, and they can be downloaded – we still mail out materials upon request. To this day, curriculum kits and newsletters and posters are still being ordered by educators, etcetera.

Interviewer: Okay. And the reason that the National Park Service elected to have the Brown Foundation do this was because you had already had things in place, or –?

Henderson: The idea of acting as the program arm of the site was decided by the Superintendent to provide an ongoing partnership role for our Foundation. I think, for the NPS, the decision was based on our past performance developing educational resources. It was fortuitous that, as a nonprofit, we had the flexibility to participate in various history and social studies conferences around the country to make sure educators were aware of the historic site and our educational resources about *Brown v. Board* for classroom use. We wanted to provide teachers better information to assist with teaching the history of *Brown.* Most importantly was accuracy becaus, there are so many misconceptions and mischaracterizations online and in books.

Interviewer: Did you ever – did you ever use distance learning programs?

Henderson: I became familiar with distance learning while on staff at the Kansas State Board of Education. With the Brown v. Board site, the Brown Foundation did not offer distance learning. Educators would order our educational resources, and we’d, on occasion, host workshops at educational conferences. But distance learning – I’m trying to think if that – you know, I think Linda Rosenblum, who was on the NPS education staff, did offer distance learning. NPS staff were very transient. There were always new staff members coming and going. I do recall one or two of their distance learning programs that we participated in, but it wasn’t something that we sponsored on our own.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. And, as I understand it, you also did an oral history program? You began an oral history program for –?

Henderson: Again, before the park opened, we received grant funding from the Hallmark Cards plant in Topeka and from the Kansas Humanities Council. With the grants, we did two things - first, we created a traveling exhibit and secondly, we used a portion of the funds to hire two PhD students as researchers for our oral history project. For the oral history project, we convened a committed in partnership with the Kansas State Historical. The committee also included several community members. The committee identified

eighty-eight people to be interviewed who were involved in *Brown* or impacted by

*Brown*.

Interviewer: Okay. So, you interviewed – you interviewed people – or they interviewed people from the other six – five sites?

Henderson: Yes. Our oral history committee set the parameters for the two researchers in terms of questioning and travel. However, at the time, we didn’t know as many people from the companion cases as we do now. In 2004, we were able to locate the majority of the

people from, Delaware, Virginia, South Carolina, and Washington, D.C. and bring everybody under the tent. But before that – this was still in the late ‘90s – we didn’t know many of the other plaintiffs. So, the oral history collection is not as comprehensive as it could have been since we weren’t aware of which plaintiffs were still living.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. So, you didn’t – you were – were you – you were aware of the names of people, but you weren’t familiar with where they were or how to get in touch with them?

Henderson: We were only aware of the named plaintiffs. Interviewer: Oh, I see. But nobody –?

Henderson: Right. But not the nuances. Not the almost two hundred plaintiffs in Virginia or the thirty-some plaintiffs in South Carolina. I mean, it took time, and, once we began researching for 2004 – for the fiftieth – it was an eye-opening experience.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Did you go to the 2004 Grand Opening?

Henderson: It seems you haven’t been to our website, have you? We all planned that Grand Opening and invited the various dignitaries to be involved in the festivities. If you visit our website, there is information about the Grand Opening, including the event schedule and a list the speakers. I was honored to give opening remarks and to be selected to introduce President Bush. The day of the Grand Opening began with our Kansas Governor hosting the first public event of the day which featured Senator and Presidential candidate John Kerry. I also spoke at that event.

Interviewer: Okay. Were there other – oh! Brown Symposium was another thing I wanted to ask you about. I noticed in some of the park documents that they had cooperated with the Brown Foundation on the Brown Symposium. That was a yearly event, correct?

Henderson: Right. Yes. We convened a national symposium for a few years, and then – I think ’99 was our last one. I explained to our Foundation Board that, because of all the work with the Park Service, I personally couldn’t keep up the pace of planning a national symposium and while also working on the historic site. So, we tabled any further symposia. The symposia had been well attended by people from across the country as far away as Alaska.

Interviewer: Okay. Let’s see – now, I think, in 2010 – were there any – let’s start with were there any other activities that the Brown Foundation participated with the park that I haven’t asked you about?

Henderson: I don’t think so, because our partnership for the monthly programs and interpretative orientation for the onsite NPS staff was really the majority of the work after the site opened in 2004, as well as speaking for other National Park Service events and activities which was very consuming.

Interviewer: Okay. So, then, I think it was in 2010 you became the Superintendent for the park, the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site?

Henderson: Right.

Interviewer: How did that – how did that occur, and (chuckles) why did you want to be the superintendent of the park with all the other things you were doing?

Henderson: I was motivated by the transient nature of Park Service staff. There had been – oh, gosh!

By then, probably a dozen different Superintendents. It was like a revolving door, and my thinking was that, since I lived in the city, and because we had worked tirelessly to create the site, I thought being the Superintendent would create some stability. And it seemed reasonable – to step into that role would allow some stability over a period of time without the revolving door and every few years new people coming and going, so I really looked at this as offering some stability to the site.

Interviewer: So, you kind of felt like you were constantly re-orienting new people to the site, and –? Henderson: Yes, it was just that the leadership – let me put it this way: with any organization,

whether it’s a corporation or a government agency or a school district, if you are constantly changing leadership, there is a sense of instability. And so, my thinking was, because I was a member the community and had grown up in Topeka and had no plans of leaving, that my being in the position would create some grounding and some stability. I planned to be in area until I retired, and it’s just that simple.

Interviewer: Okay. So, when you first started working as superintendent of the park, that was your objective – was to provide stability in the leadership?

Henderson: It was the intent. It was the only reason for pursuing the position.

Interviewer: Okay. And so, as superintendent, what would you say was your management philosophy for the park, and your strategy for achieving your goals for the park?

Henderson: I learned very early on that there was a lot of opposition to my being considered, and I’m not sure if it was because people felt that, if our name was on the building, it really would not be appropriate - I can’t speak for them, I just know there was a faction – there may have been several factions that were vehemently opposed, and so it was a very difficult position to be where you were not wanted. Based on that I didn’t stay long.

Interviewer: So, would you say that was the biggest challenge for achieving whatever – what your goals were for the park, the –?

Henderson: Absolutely! It created a barrier that, in some ways, appeared insurmountable, but certainly was a barrier. In my view, these feelings were somewhat nonsensical, and rather than dealing with that kind of utter nonsense and petty behavior, it was time to move on.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you – did you receive any kind of direction or training from the Midwest Regional Office in being superintendent of a park?

Henderson: Yeah, they do have training opportunities, and, yes, I did attend a couple of trainings that were more like networking, is how I viewed it even more so than training.

Interviewer: Okay. And was this an established program that they had superintendents go to, or –? Henderson: Well, I really can’t speak to that. That’s a good question.

Interviewer: Okay. Did they give you any directions, or did they just say, “Here it is. You’ve done your training, now go be a Superintendent?”

Henderson: You and I have been around a while, and I would imagine you’ve been in different positions as well, and any position you are in, oftentimes, you learn by doing, and some of it becomes pretty apparent pretty early on. And, if you’ve been around the organization for a while some of it comes by way of observation.

Interviewer: Okay. Would you say – what would you say was the condition of the administration when you became the Superintendent? You mentioned a lot of turnover, so that was, apparently, one of the problems that you faced. Did –?

Henderson: Right. Well, I wouldn’t call it a problem, because I learned that that’s just the nature of the organization. The NPS staff have nearly four hundred places they can work. And, to some, there may be a park they’ve always wanted to be part of. So, there’s no shortage of opportunities. It’s just the transient nature of what they do.

Interviewer: Okay, so that, sort of, meant – made continuity of, you know, institutional knowledge kind of a problem at the park, I would think?

Henderson: As an outsider, that’s how I viewed it, uh-huh.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you re-organize the administration of the park during your tenure there?

Henderson: No, I did not, because – as I had mentioned earlier, because of the vocal and evident opposition, the overarching concern became the pushback to my presence. It became apparent immediately that this was something I needed to resign from in hopes of regaining some sense of sanity.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. I did know that you were only there for a year. Henderson: No, I was not there that long.

Interviewer: Oh, no? Oh, okay. Well, the park records show it as a year, but then they don’t tend to give you the exact date, you know.

Henderson: Yeah. No, it was only a few months.

Interviewer: Oh, really? Okay, so, from when to –? How about you give me the exact date. That would be useful.

Henderson: I think it was about six months. Interviewer: Okay, so, from January to June?

Henderson: No. When did I begin? I think I began – hmm. That’s a good question! Yeah, that’s as good as any! (Laughter)

Interviewer: Okay (laughs), well, let’s try to think of it this way: was school in session when you became a park superintendent?

Henderson: I think so.

Interviewer: And was it in session when you stopped being the park superintendent?

Henderson: That’s a good question! (Laughter) I ended my tenure in December, so it would have been probably – hmm. I think I started in that summer of 2011, and then I ended in – I sent my letter of resignation in December.

Interviewer: Okay. Alright. Well, that’s helpful to know. We do document when there is a hiatus of superintendents, acting superintendents, and that sort of thing in the – and that makes it easier to be more specific to have somebody tell us when they were actually –

Henderson: Sure. Right. As I recall – I believe it was summer – I know I resigned in December, so it had to have been –

Interviewer: Sometime in the summer?

Henderson: Maybe it was only four or five months, but, yes, I know December.

Interviewer: Okay. Alright. So, during that time – the park has several outreach programs. Did you participate in any of those kind of things, like – I know March for Parks is in the – I believe it’s in the Spring.

Henderson: Well, no I resigned in December.

Interviewer: Okay. Alright. And were there any major programs or projects going on at the park during your tenure? Any, like, restorations –?

Henderson: The major projects going on during my tenure (laughs) were the factions working very diligently to express their displeasure with my being there. Staff engaged in anonymous calls to the Department of the Interior Inspector General, meaning most of my time was spent talking to their investigators, who, I discovered, had no interest in my work but rather wanted information they could spin in ways they thought would be publicly embarrassing. Asking about my dating and sex life, ownership of my cars, how I spent my time away from work, who attended my son’s wedding, etcetera. Hard to believe our government pays people to engage in that type of retaliation. When I contacted the Regional Office to express concern about the nature of the questioning, I was told if I filed a formal complaint, there would be more retaliation. Seems pretty obvious why I needed to leave the petty, irrational, mean-spirited operation to return to the Brown Foundation. As it turned out, the report was uploaded once I was no longer an NPS employee. Crazy that the government would move forward against a private citizen. Even my home address was published, which I asked legal counsel to demand be removed. I also received vulgar text messages from NPS staff. Sad indeed. Once we packed up and left the building, I cannot tell you the level of relief to be out of such a toxic environment. The Regional Director even

told our Board that the Foundation could remain in the building, but I could not because I had a strong personality. What on earth was that other than personal retaliation? Shortly thereafter, a former NPS investigator told me about a book called *The Case of The Indian Trader: Billie* [*Malone and the National Park Service*](https://www.amazon.com/Case-Indian-Trader-National-Investigation/dp/0826348602/ref%3Dsr_1_1?crid=36PWU09RY7F0T&dchild=1&keywords=the%2Bcase%2Bof%2Bthe%2Bindian%2Btrader&qid=1599594359&sprefix=THe%2BCase%2Bof%2Bthe%2Bindian%2B%2Caps%2C171&sr=8-1)[*Investigation at Hubbell Trading Post*](https://www.amazon.com/Case-Indian-Trader-National-Investigation/dp/0826348602/ref%3Dsr_1_1?crid=36PWU09RY7F0T&dchild=1&keywords=the%2Bcase%2Bof%2Bthe%2Bindian%2Btrader&qid=1599594359&sprefix=THe%2BCase%2Bof%2Bthe%2Bindian%2B%2Caps%2C171&sr=8-1)*.* The book confirmed that what I experienced was normal practice within the NPS.

Interviewer: Oh. Well, that’s disappointing. But, as far as the park, itself, was concerned, there wasn’t – weren’t any restoration projects or –?

Henderson: I did have success in getting a few building repairs made. There were some issues with roof leaks in the primary gallery. Just structural building maintenance sort of things.

Interviewer: Okay. You worked with Treva Sykes?

Henderson: No, this was from the Regional Office. They needed to bring in a qualified contractor to conduct the repair. It wasn’t maintenance at the level of the building maintenance. It was maintenance from the structure of the building.

Interviewer: Okay. Was there any – were there any other adjustments to building or the – or the –

Henderson: Well, I just did simple things, like some signage where visitors were often found heading up to the second floor, which was not a public floor. Just having signage so that they knew that was off-limits to the public. Small things.

Interviewer: Okay. And what about the exhibits? Were there any changes to the exhibits during your tenure?

Henderson: No.

Interviewer: Okay. Alright. Now, at some point, the Nicodemus Historic Site was, like, being mentored by the Brown v. Board of Education site. Was that during your tenure?

Henderson: No.

Interviewer: Okay. So, you did not have to worry about the Nicodemus Historic Site as well as Brown

v. Board?

Henderson: No.

Interviewer: Okay. What about budgets? Did you have any – I don’t know if you were there long enough to have done something about budgets, but it sounds like –

Henderson: I was not.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, the budgets are usually done in September, so – Henderson: No.

Interviewer: Okay. You did not have anything to do with the budgets? Henderson: No.

Interviewer: Alright. Did you have a volunteer program? Henderson: There was a volunteer program already in place.

Interviewer: Well, was it other than members – well, was it other than Board members from Brown – the Brown Foundation?

Henderson: No, our organization did not provide volunteers. Volunteers were from the general public.

Interviewer: Okay. So, you had a –?

Henderson: From the university, most of them. Interviewer: Okay. What did they do?

Henderson: Well, they were directed by the NPS Chief of Interp and – people to help with greeting visitors and serving as the public face on the first floor, the bookstore.

Interviewer: The volunteers helped with the bookstore?

Henderson: We didn’t have a large volunteer group. It was very small. Very few volunteers.

Interviewer: Okay. And, during your tenure – or, at any time – did you know if the park had other partners besides the Brown Foundation?

Henderson: No. I believe they did not. I know they had talked about the University of Kansas, but no formal arrangements ever materialized and I’m not aware of others. I think they did, eventually, form a partnership with a school down the street, Williams Magnet Elementary School.

Interviewer: Okay. And for the purposes of –?

Henderson: I have no idea. It was already in place. (Laughter)

Interviewer: Oh, I see. Okay. Alright. So, the Spencer Library at KU was not a partner? Henderson: It was not.

Interviewer: Okay. Alright. You’ve probably answered this question, but what would you say was the most difficult aspect of being the superintendent at Brown v. Board?

Henderson: Well, I don’t know if it was difficult. I guess it was surprising that these factional entities developed and the reason for their development, which was opposition to my being there. So, I don’t know. I think it was more of a surprise than anything, and clearly at the level at which they proceeded to operate, it was just surprising. I thought, “Boy, I need to get out of here!” (Laughter)

Interviewer: Okay. So, of the things that you did, both while you were Superintendent and as president – a member – as president of the Brown Foundation, what would you say was the thing you’re most proud of doing, that you think did – was effective?

Henderson: Well, obviously, there has to be a source of pride to have created a National Park. How many people can say they’ve done that? And having stuck to it for all those years – twenty-one years all total, fourteen to get it open, and then seven to really give it some program anchoring. Yes, of course I’m proud of that. I mean, it’s a huge chunk of time. I hung in there, did the work, certainly made a contribution. I was very pleased that our vision came to be, that they listened when it was time to create exhibits and the content for interpreting the story for the public. It’s an extreme source of pride. Absolutely.

Interviewer: Great! So, would you say that your, let’s say, favorite thing that you did for the park was to get it established? Or was it –?

Henderson: Well, yes. That, and the programs which were amazing because we were able to bring, other historic figures to the community, and we learned a lot, as well. We focused on Native American history, and Asian-American history, and women’s history, and the histories of underrepresented groups. So, the sky was the limit, and it was very – it was engaging, it was inspiring, the community really seemed to appreciate having access to those programs, and speakers, and movies, and exhibits, and things that we did each month. So, yes, it really was something that anyone, I think, would have been pleased with, and I know I certainly was. And creating the Brown Quarterly curriculum newsletter, working with teachers, and being involved with different history conferences. Yes, it was extremely satisfying.

Interviewer: (Chuckles) Okay. Did you have – make contact or have programs with other sites – related sites, like Central High School in Little Rock or –?

Henderson: Central High School, came online after us – quite a few years after, and I did have occasion to attend a planning meeting with some of the Little Rock Nine. As a group, we worked with the new Superintendent they’d assigned to the Little Rock site which was not open yet. Our group met with her about program ideas, etcetera, because we’d already had that experience.

Interviewer: Oh, so you were – you were, kind of, consulting?

Henderson: I suppose you could say that, but we were, really trying to focus on the connectivity of our history.

Interviewer: Okay. So, the last question I want to ask you is: in the – in this interview, we’ve ranged kind of far and wide of questions. Is there anything that you were hoping I would ask you to talk about that I haven’t asked you about?

Henderson: No, I don’t think so. I think, as you said, the important thing was just conducting this interview. I hope you will visit our website. I think there are blanks that will be filled by visiting our website. Spend some time there and look at the different dropdowns.

There’s also a link on our website about the site’s Grand Opening. There is a link for our latest project which is a book of essays by people involved in the cases. I think the important thing was having the opportunity to share that the Brown Foundation was responsible for initiating the establishment of the site and that we spent more than a decade getting it up and running, etcetera. I guess I’m pleased that people who read

this document will be made aware of our efforts including exhibit contend and naming the exhibit galleries. Ultimately, we wanted to ensure accuracy. The only shocking aspect was the – what we weren’t aware of how the relationship could digress, you know, once I made the decision to pursue the position as Superintendent in order to create some stability which was certainly not taken that way by some of the staff, etcetera. After that, there was little to no regard for the years of sacrifice and hard work. After I became Superintendent, then returned to the Foundation, being around the staff and working at the site became a pretty dour situation.

Interviewer: That’s too bad. Did you – so, does the Brown Foundation still have a relationship with the park?

Henderson: No.

Interviewer: That was severed? Okay.

Henderson: Yes. As an organization and as a family, we had to walk away. It is impossible to counter lies that have the weight of the federal government behind them. People want to think they can trust our government. The factions that were working night and day, really, were somewhat relentless in their efforts to sever the relationship. And, finally, we thought, “It’s not worth it. It’s time to walk away.” What those behind this effort to disparage us don’t seem to understand is that there are legacy families all over this country, and, by that, I mean, whether your last name is Miranda, because of that Supreme Court decision, or whether your last name is Loving because of the Loving decision, or whether your last name is Brown, or whether you are one of the Little Rock Nine, your experience rests with you. Sure, it’s great that there’s an historic site intended to interpret the history of *Brown v. Board of Education* to the extent people can make their way to Topeka – but those of us that live and breathe this history because it’s who we are – for us, the work never ends. And so, if the disparaging factions thought this would somehow end the activities and work we do to share our history with the nation and beyond– it was really shortsighted. We’ve never stopped working. I still travel constantly lecturing about *Brown v. Board* – and, lucky for me, with this pandemic, my last business travel was in late February, 2020. I was scheduled to travel March through June and, of course, those events were cancelled. My point is that, every year, throughout the year, for probably as long as I am able, there will be groups wanting to learn about *Brown v. Board* through the lens of my family. Because of its national significance and the legal precedent *Brown* set for every Fourteenth Amendment case, there will be interest. For the NPS pushing us out of the historic site or saying bad things or trying to create the impression that we’re bad people, placing stories in the media that were not true, really didn’t accomplish anything, because we just relocated our workspace and kept on going. So that was really disappointing to me, that NPS staff were so petty. For the working relationship to devolve into – being subjected to their petty behavior, it just – we had to walk away. I thought, “This is not a fight worth having. Let’s go.” (Laughs)

Interviewer: Okay. So, was that – was that right after you left as Superintendent?

Henderson: Well, the rumors of factions not wanting me to be hired started during the interview process and went from rumor to actively pushing me out.

Interviewer: No, I mean the – I mean the severance between the Brown Foundation and the park.

Henderson: Oh, yes. Once I returned to the Foundation in January, the drum beat continued until we ultimately needed to walk away. I think there were some within the NPS that were surprised that we, as an organization, were willing to walk away. But, one thing you learn, even as a child, if people are being dishonest, and when dishonesty has the moniker of the government attached to it, then, it’s really time to walk away. And so, no regrets, and I may never see the building again in this lifetime, because I just cannot see myself, ever, affiliating or being in the same space with people that – or an entity – an organization – that has that sort of a culture. I mean, the NPS has an organizational culture that we learned – and I had been warned, early on, by a long-time staffer, with whom I forged a friendships over time, and who finally retired – but, he told me, “Be careful – they’ll (the NPS staff) will make something up, it won’t be true, and you’ll be out on the street.” He said he’d seen it too many times. There are also books written about the toxic culture of the NPS by people that have left the Service and written about their experience. So, others have sounded the alarm. As long as I was on the outside, as a partner with the Brown Foundation, I certainly hadn’t been exposed to that side of the NPS, but, once I, stepped inside their bubble, it was extremely apparent, and shocking, and sad, and disappointing, but certainly something that wasn’t worth my time.

Interviewer: (Pause) Okay. Well, I really appreciate you spending your time to talk to me about this. Henderson: Okay, you are very welcome.

Interviewer: I am going to turn off the recording device. We have talked for almost an hour. Henderson: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW