

**Charles Turner Interview
by Samantha Mooney, Intern,
DeKalb History Center
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SAMANTHA MOONEY: Today is December 7, 2018. It is 10:35. I am currently in the Historic DeKalb Courthouse, and I am interviewing Charles Turner. Why don't you tell me a little about yourself? What was your life like when you were growing up?

CHARLES TURNER: My life when I was growing up was [unclear—could be “cool” or “cruel”?]. You don't realize that you have disadvantages and you're poor until you get old enough to look back. You know that everything is not always right; a lot of things is not. But it don't impact you in a way if you have friends and—this is my upbringing—but if you have friends and sisters and brothers that you can deal with in a way that you get along. So even though, in the eyes of society, we didn't have that much, we were pretty cool.

SM: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

CT: At that time I was the oldest of eight. There was ten of us [inaudible], but my oldest brother died at birth, and I had a brother that died between some of my siblings. And—but there was five boys, three girls. And we—now there's only five of us left. We were close. We argue and fuss and fight just like every other group of family, but most of all we stuck together pretty good, up until even to now [inaudible] sisters and brothers.

SM: What did your parents do?

CT: My father was—actually he did a lot of stuff. But he worked in the younger days, as a boy, as a mechanic. He worked for trucking companies. He actually worked here in Decatur on the Square. There used to be an auto parts—auto company right here on the Square, and he worked for them for a while. And over the years he worked at different jobs that he had side jobs. Did what he had to do to take care of the family. And my mother, she was—she stayed at home. A few times she worked as a domestic, but basically she was a housewife.

SM: So when you say your mother worked as a domestic, what do you mean? She just worked from home primarily?

CT: She worked—no, you're talking about “domestic” as being a housewife. But she--a domestic back in those days was where you worked in a White's household. She probably worked for a couple of White women that my daddy worked for on the side.

SM: Did she ever talk about what kind of work she did or her experience?

CT: Not really. My mother was—my mother was my mother: very opinionated lady, and she told you how she felt, and she didn't take much [inaudible] from many people. So you know, working like that didn't do too well, because she could have got in a lot of trouble [*laughs*]. She didn't care too much who it was. And you got her nerves, Ella would tell you how she felt.

SM: So you mentioned like you don't—you didn't realize at the time that you were poor. What time did you realize it, about?

CT: Well, as I got older, I remember not having enough to—you only had one pair, a couple of pair of pants. You've got, like, new clothes for school around Easter. When Easter came, you got clothes, and Christmas, and these were some of the things that carried you through the year—your dress clothes and maybe a couple of pair of jeans. And you had those that you had. You wore a lot of hand-me-downs from—I remember this one lady, a White woman. Her name was Miss Hamilton, and my daddy used to clean her yard and stuff. She had a son named Jimmy. And Jimmy used to—Jimmy had Muscular Dystrophy, and she used to send some of his clothes and stuff, and I could wear his clothes. So, you know, they were really pretty nice clothes, so. We utilized hand-me-downs, and then, you know, they'd go down to the next brother, because I had a brother that was exactly—what, I was born—Richard was about nine months—nine or ten months younger than I was. And so he was born in '49, and I was born in '48.

SM: Growing up, did your parents ever talk about World War II?

CT: My father was in the military, and he was—he was, I don't know. He never talked about his military service. And I don't think I ever asked him about it until he [sic; means "I?"] got grown, and he still didn't talk about it. So I thought where I'm going now is I've sent off for his military records to try to find—because I found the photograph of his—of him in his uniform once. I was at my uncle's house, his brother, and we were going through an old Bible, and it fell out, a photograph of my dad in his uniform [inaudible]. You know, the picture made me feel kind of cool, because I've been in the military, too, you know, and I felt that connectivity.

SM: So where exactly did you grow up?

CT, *laughing*: Where didn't I grow up? I was born in Florida, Tallahassee. And we moved here. It's funny, I can remember some of the things, but we moved from

Tallahassee to Ellaville—Ellaville, Georgia. I could have been around maybe four—three or four. But I could remember my grandmother's house. And when I got older, I used to think it was this big house and stuff. So one time we went back to see the place, this little shotgun shack that was sitting out there. And it wasn't too much bigger than a room when you really looked at it. But back in my mind, in those days, it was the biggest, because I'll always remember my granddad, and I remember my granddaddy had this room off to the side. And you go in, you had a room over here—that's where we slept. And you go through, and in the room there was a fireplace. You had that bed over here, all that clutter and everything in that same room. Fireplace with a big shotgun over the—that used to hang over the doorway so he could always grab it. And you went through that room right there, and you went into the kitchen. I remember that kitchen because the big stove, and there were those two chairs [inaudible] to sit down and [inaudible]. And she'd always have fatback on that stove. You know what fatback is, right?

SM: Mm-mm

CT: Fatback is a part of the hog. It's the outer portion of bacon. And they use it to get the fat off of it to use for frying. And it is where lard comes from. And she used to have that on the stove, always. And you could look out the window, you could see the church down the street, the pot out there where she made candles, soap, and all that stuff. And—but it's funny that those memories are always stuck in my head. And also he had a little-bitty smokehouse where tobacco—he used to smoke his tobacco. And that's where I learned I never want to chew tobacco [*laughs*]. They kept telling me, "You don't mess with that tobacco," so they used to have [rest of sentence inaudible]. Got some, I was sick as a dog. And they would let me stay sick. But go ahead.

SM: So where did you go after that [inaudible]?

CT: OK, well, when we left there, my father had come to Atlanta to look for work, so we left there, and we came here to Atlanta. We lived over near McDaniel Street, back over in that area. Then we moved to Carver Homes, because that was in about 1950-something, because I remember I was about six, five or six, because I remember going to the first or second grade there, Slater Elementary. And people talk about "the projects," but the projects back in those days was really built for White people, as an offshoot of the war and men coming back. But you also had African-

American projects, too, and all of them was really nice. These were really, really nice. And I remember this one place that we lived, I would get up in the morning; and back then, you wasn't afraid to—a kid wasn't afraid to come outside. But there was one thing about it, because we lived on this hill, and I could always stand—because we were faced—that hill was facing east, and I always could see the sun coming up in the morning. It was always so good to see that sun coming up.

And from there we left. We moved from there, and where'd we move? We moved to Decatur—that's when we moved to Decatur, because I remember that, going to Beacon Elementary School, I remember being in the second grade there, because my Sunday school teacher, Miss McFarland, was also my schoolteacher. We spent a lot of time in church. God, we spent a lot [*laughs*]—Southern Baptist. My dad was a deacon there at Thankful—when it used to be on Atlanta Avenue. That's where I got baptized at. And, we'd got to Sunday school, eleven o'clock service, evening service—I mean, regular service, then evening service, then you went to Wednesday night prayer meeting. You would—I was so glad when I got out of there [*laughs*]. I could tell you just about everybody in the Bible who begat everybody [*laughs*]. But at the church, Reverend Tucker used to have this thing at Sunday night to see if you listened in Sunday school, and he would have this little contest between the kids. And it was—he would give out a dollar, but he would give it in increments, where you had, like, I think, it was two or three parts—a couple of questions for a quarter, then you had one for fifty cents or seventy-five cents or something like that. Always had school Monday [*laughs*]. Because I studied that Bible and stuff like that.

And let's see what else? Thankful, I went to Beacon, went to Beacon Elementary School for about a couple of years. That was before they built Trinity High School, because when they started building on Trinity, we were living in South Brook Court. South Brook Court is not there anymore. We were this—South Brook Court was after Herring Street. South Brook Court used to be Herring Street and all of that. And the school and stuff used to be over there. And that area, even though it was nice then, there was an old—right across the street from us, there was this old Sanctified Holiness Church, right on the corner. And in the evening you'd hear the tambourine and the drum and they'd be singing and stuff, and they could send you to hell, I mean, like you—just about. But this one morning I woke up—I [*inaudible*] stayed in bed a lot as a kid [*laughs*]. But anyway, one morning I woke up, and I went outside, and they had a

pool. In the back of the church there was a little pond, and they did baptizing in there. But that was the first time that I had seen it. And they had all these folks getting ready to get baptized, and they was in these white robes. I thought they were ghosts [laughs]. They scared me to death [laughs]. I went back to the house. [Laughing] OK, what else you want to know?

SM: So what was your education like?

CT: Education was that you got to learn. You got to learn, that is your key [inaudible]. And I loved reading, I loved reading. But I read as a kid a lot of biographies. I read and I loved fairy tales—Hans Christian Andersen, the Grimm brothers, all the stuff like that. Norse—I mean Northern mythologies I read, because you kind of always, no matter how hard things was, there was a possibility that if you worked your way out of it, you could get out of it. And in a lot of ways I still believe in fairy tales. And I went on the—I look—because I keep records of a lot of stuff. My grades were not the best in the world, but I must have had a pretty good attitude, because one of my teachers told me—they had a—“If it wasn’t for his attitude, I’d have threw” [laughs] [rest of sentence inaudible]. You know, I questioned people a lot. I challenged the system, even at a young age, which got me in a lot of trouble, lot of problems, but it also gave me a chance because sometimes people want you to challenge the system and don’t accept everything as it is. So I went on and graduated from high school. I went to—I went to Pryor Street, Edgewood, Reynoldstown—I mean, what’s that, Wesley Avenue?—Slater. I went to four different elementary schools.

SM: Wow

CT: I went to four different elementary schools. Then I went to—I started at David T. Howard for high school, and one of my—grades still weren’t that good, but I kept up good. My counselor asked me to consider going to the integrated—this was back in 1963. I said, “You know, I couldn’t do that. You know how I feel about different stuff.”

But she said, “You, know, I think it would be a good experience.” [Inaudible] So I did it. I signed up, my mama and daddy said OK, signed up. And we had to go through like Claudia [Stucke] was talking about, as a group. She was a Friends, Quaker. You had to go through this orientation with the Quakers, and they kind of gave you a--ways of dealing with a situation in a nonviolent situation and all kinds of things like that. But I got there. It was what I thought it was. I didn’t live that far from

the community, so I knew exactly what the community was like. And I had about two fights the first day, so. But you could smoke. If your parents gave you permission, you could smoke where they had a place. But they wouldn't let me on there. So, I said, "Y'all are going to let me down here, because I'm going to smoke my cigarette." There was only six Black guys in the whole school, so there were about three or four more fights and stuff like that. I could smoke now. And they had to sit—

So I started playing football. I played on the B-team football team for about a—but one day, I think I pissed a group of them off. And anyway, the next day I went to school. At that time I wasn't really familiar with the custom of hanging a dummy in effigy for football games. And one of the guys that I—one of the guys, Jerome, we got into a fight with a couple of other groups. So when I got back to school the next day, I thought that they'd hung Jerome. Scared the shit out of me. Lord have mercy, they done hung Jerome! So I went back home—I didn't go to class, I went back home, because I didn't want to go back to school. I didn't even tell my mama. But the next day I went, I took my shotgun with me, and I hid it in the bushes. But I went to sleep—I guess I was stressed. I have this thing about after I stressful situations, I go to sleep. Even when I was in the military, after combat, I would go to sleep. And I went to sleep. And they found it, you know, so they told me that—at the—I didn't get suspended; I got a good conversation, because nobody got hurt or nothing. So at the end of the semester that year, they told me that they didn't think that I was good material in a way. So I went on back.

I was not one of the more peaceful ones. I believed sometimes that if pushed, if you don't stand up for yourself, they will run over you. So that—then I went on back—I went to Carver High School, which was a vocational high school, and I was working there. I worked in the machine shop, and I learned how to work on heavy machinery. That's how I lost my finger, and I got it cut off, so I had to finish school through summer school. So after I went to school, I went into the military. Because of my training there, I didn't have to go to tech school, I was able to go to on-the-job training.

SM: What did you think when they told you that you weren't a good fit?

CT: Well, it's just one of those situations where--there's a lot of times that, in a society like that, I was told a lot of things I would never, you know, be able to do what I wanted to do because I was Black. And my wife gave me a poster one time; I used to

keep it in my office. “The best revenge is doing what people say you can’t do.” So, if you say I can’t do it, then I’m going to show you. So that’s the way I was growing up.

SM: And when you saw that effigy of Jerome, do you remember exactly what you were thinking and how you said you were really scared?

CT: Yeah, I said it, “Shit, they done hung Jerome! I’ll be next, because I was in the fight, too.” But that’s why I got the protection to protect myself.

SM: And you mentioned other fights. Were those like—

CT: Just fist-fights

SM: Yeah

CT: Yeah, just school fights

SM: Did anyone ever make any comments to you?

CT: Oh, girl, yes! You talking about racial—look, that’s a—those are things you don’t—that’s a part of life back in the time. And I remember, we used to walk home, and everybody, four or five of us, used to walk home. And the school bus with the White kids would drive by, and I remember them throwing packs of human feces at us out of the bus. So, you know, it’s some of that stuff—it’s just the way it was. And you deal with it. So there’s a lot of times when you talk to people—people live in nostalgia. You see things from the world in which you grew up in, and what your life was not necessarily someone else’s life. So it’s just like a lot of people were talking about different groups and diverse groups and stuff. How can you deal with that? I’ve been Black all my life. I’ve been dealing with bullshit all my life, so, you know, it—I either help—I have to take care of that. And I can’t really—who am I to judge? That’s the way I look at it. Who am I to judge? I used to have an ex-father-in-law, used to tell me, “If a man took half of his life trying to figure out what his problems was, and the other half trying to fix them, he wouldn’t have time to be in nobody else’s business.” And that’s the way I’ve got to try to deal with my life. I know I’ve done some wrong stuff in my life, some real stupid stuff. But that’s all a part of—if you don’t make no mistake, you ain’t doing nothing.

SM: Earlier, too, you mentioned a conversation with your school counselor, and you said, “You know how I feel about that.” What did you mean?

CT: I didn’t—back then, it’s that—I wasn’t totally militant, but I was not a pacifist. And I’m not going to take a lot of what, you know, I’ve got to go through, but

I'll give it my best shot. So that's what I tried to do, I tried to give it my best shot, you know. That's what [inaudible].

SM: When was the first time, like, do you remember a time when you kind of became aware of, like, the differences between being White and Black? How old would you say you were?

CT: That question has come up a lot in different ways, but I think I've always known. You live in a system where you didn't associate with Whites. The Whites you knew were over there, and you were over here, so you know that that happened. Your difference--if you're over here, and I mean, you're over here, and they're over there, and you can't cross over there, so something's wrong with it. And then, you know, as you're growing up, you go to different stores and things with your parents, and you know that you can't do things that you see other White little kids doing. So there's a difference. I remember one time, my father used to work with this company down on Ivy Street. And he got hurt, something like that. And he sent me down there to take a message to the guy he worked for. And evidently, you know, like the guy says something derogatory—I can't remember what it was, but I knew it pissed me off, because, you know—about my dad. And I—that's—you get to learn where you fit into the system. So you learn how to deal with the system. I answered your question. What's the next question? *[Laughs]*

SM: So when exactly did you go into the military?

CT: I went into the military November 21, 1966. I turned eighteen in August, and in November I was on a plane to San Antonio.

SM: Another back-tracking question—we'll go back to your military service. So what did you think of like, you know, obviously, like desegregation, like the Civil Rights Movement? Like, what were your thoughts on it?

CT: One of the things—OK, if I went to the school, they said it would help the system. I didn't care much about integration as to maybe we can get to have the same things they got. That was—I wanted a brand-new book. I didn't want a book that anybody else had marked in. I wanted a nice-looking school. The school we went to was cool and everything like that, and the school spirit was great, but it was old. Why can't we get something new? And, you know, you want to see what was so special about the other side and whatnot. I think when I remember this little girl, she loaned me a pencil one day. You remember little things like that, where other ones, you could

see the hate in their eyes. You could literally see hate in people's eyes and stuff. So you deal with that. But you know you got to deal with it to survive and to get out of there.

SM: What was your first day like at Roosevelt High?

CT: I don't know. You've asked me to go back almost fifty years [*laughs*]. Fifty years. That's over fifty years. That's over half a century, girl. That's—it's—they were more surprised than I was. It was like—but, you know, you can't sit here, and you see a chair move to keep you from sitting there. So the teacher pointed you out, "Go over there and sit down." Things like that.

SM: How were the teachers? Did they support you, or do you feel like they were kind of forced—

CT: A lot of the teachers were forced into a situation that they really didn't want to be in. And you can't just change your nature just because, you know, your job says you got to be there. But for the most part, they were, I would say, except for a few of them, a couple of them, they were professional. They did what they had to do, and they [*inaudible*] there.

SM: And the couple who weren't? What were they like?

CT: "OK, you can just go ahead and sit. If I don't acknowledge you, you're not there." So a lot of the times, it was not being acknowledged, and that's the safest for most everybody. I exist because you acknowledge that I'm there. If you don't acknowledge me, I ain't there.

SM: How did that make you feel?

CT: [*Inaudible*] defiant—I put a more polite word. "I'll show you." [*Laughs*] I guess that's been one of my biggest problems, even in the military. "Watch! Watch!" But that's what books do to you. The more I learned, the dumber I felt, you know. The more I got into a book, the more—I read books. One of my favorite heroes—I think I told you about that one time. Two of my favorite heroes was Genghis Khan and Chief Crazy Horse [*laughs*]. Both of them defied the odds, and so—It ain't defying odds, it's just that—believing in yourself and your dreams. As Langston Hughes once said, the last part of his poem, "A man without dreams is like a broken-wing bird that cannot fly." I got to have my dreams. I got to have—and it's the journey, you know. I know what's out—where I say I want to go, but I just want to take this journey. And that's [*inaudible*], that's me. [*Pause*] You getting tired? [*Laughs*]

SM, *laughing*: No, I'm just—I'm thinking, absorbing. So what did you think about the Civil Rights movement, on the whole? I know you said you were militant, and so did you tend to view it in a positive light, or did you think changes needed to be made—

CT: Changes definitely needed to be made, because, you know, I wanted to be able to go into the—I remember long before the sit-ins, we used to go into restaurants, like, downtown and, like in the sit-ins, they would come in, and they'd sit down and then—But what we used to do, we'll go in, and we'll sit at the table, and then we'd have a couple of guys we had look out for police or something, and then we'd get up and run. But that was the way of—and this was back in the early '50s and stuff like that, before—but it was our way of fighting back. I even had a chance to see Stokely Carmichael once. I lived in the community where he came to, and I heard him talk. I went to a school—the school that I went to when I first went in, David T. Howard, we had men teachers, Black men teachers. You don't have it that much now. And that was significant at the time. And a lot of people say, "Well, you don't have Black men in the Black community." Why not? Because you got a third of them in jail in a prison system that's been systematically put in there as commodity for an ever-growing prison system. Then you got another part of them in your military, and you got another part of them that's on dope that you brought back to create a—one of the things the Viet Cong used to say, because they used to—I mean, they just about gave dope to the GIs—and what they would say, that "I don't have to shoot you because if you're so physically impaired, you become a casualty. You're a walking casualty." Well, that is part of the system that put a lot of Black men in jail and in dependency. And then you don't have that positive Black image then. So—[to SM] how do you think I feel about the system? [*Laughs*]

SM: Do you remember, like, when you first got to vote?

CT: First got what?

SM: When you first got to vote?

CT: Yeah, I was—it was—I was in basic training. I forget, how did we do that? Because there was—I can't remember really—but I know I voted, because I said--I swore I would vote. I told you one of my cousins got killed for voting.

SM: Mm-mm

CT: You ever heard of—well, my daddy's first cousin—guy by the name of Maceo Snipes? That was my daddy's first cousin. And it's been drilled in all of us, the stuff like that, over the years. And you—a lot of the folks in my family believe in yourself and that doing—that education and voting and things like that is—can get work in the system to help make it grow. But then, I believe that also you have to sometimes excite the system to evoke a change.

SM: So when you say that you were a little bit more militant, did you ever, like-- were you ever involved with any of the more Black Militant groups, or was that just your personal ideology?

CT: When I was in Viet Nam, we used to have this group called—well, you're not supposed to really have groups in the military, but they're all over the place—called Black Unity Congress. And I was [*laughs*—I was, what you call it? Minister of Information [*laughs*] because I worked—I was security policeman, I was a policeman. We get in trouble and stuff like that, then knowing things of the military code of—the Code of Military Justice and stuff, we could utilize the law to try to protect ourselves and stuff like that. I read a lot, and that's what I did.

SM: So another question for you, when you went into the military, that's kind of just right after Civil Rights—

CT: No, no, no, no, no. The Civil Rights was right in the middle of the Civil Rights—the Viet Nam, that era. Because I was in the military when Martin Luther King got assassinated.

SM: OK

CT: And one of the things about that is that you're bound to—you make an oath to this country. Now, this is a screwed-up country in a lot of ways, but it's my country. I come from a screwed-up family, but it's my family. And the thing of it is, how do I make it better? And you work within it, even if you have to fight your sisters and brothers physically sometimes, but it's your way of saying, "OK, I believe it strong enough that I've got to fight you so that you know that this is the way I see it. Because your way is not always right." So, and it's like when King got shot, all of us—especially military—but military police got put on alert. I'll never forget, I was going to see my mother, because my mother lived in Elizabeth, New Jersey; my grandmother lived in Newark. And they put is all on shut-down, you know, we—on standby. We couldn't go nowhere. And then we had to learn riot control. And where I was, that they sent the

82nd Airborne out, so—and we were the ones that guarded the planes and all that stuff for the 82nd Airborne [inaudible]. So how would you feel—I'm asking you a question—if this society was blocking your progress toward the American dream, but you've got to protect everything that you desire that they deny you?

SM: Yeah, that would be very difficult.

CT: Right. So it, you know—but once you're out in places like Viet Nam and stuff like that, it's—in certain areas, you have to forget about that, or you won't make it back home.

SM: Yeah. So what was your experience like in Viet Nam?

CT: Like in what way?

SM: Like, how would you personally assess it? Like, did your feelings change? Were you initially against the Viet Nam War when you were deployed, or did you think it was a just cause, and what was your experience in the country, and how did your views—like, what were your views kind of after your deployment?

CT: I thought it was bullshit afterwards. When I first went over, I thought, "I'm fighting for my country." When I first got over there, it was—I was in the Air Force [inaudible] combat, stuff like that. But that proved to be a lie. Ask me some more questions.

SM: OK. So what was your—what would you say was your primary duties in the Air Force in Viet Nam?

CT: When I first got over there, I went over there as military police, and I was to guard and—guard the base and work within the police system there. OK, that was simple, I thought. But you had two types—you had law enforcement, and you had security. And back in those days, sixty-, let's see—the military police—the Air Force was only about, as a unit, was only about thirty-five years old. So in Viet Nam a lot of our organization was really coming into being. And as the military police, what we did, the Army took care of the outside of the perimeter, and the Air Force took care of the inside, and that means everything. And so what I did when I first got there, which was one of the things I look at, you know, like when you—that border that they're building now in Mexico?

SM: Yes

CT: Where they're putting all that concertina wire? We did that, because I remember when—I always remember that first day, getting off the plane. We were

driving in the back of the truck [inaudible], and I saw this guy pulling that concertina wire, and it was--you got three strands—you got a roll here, a roll here, and a roll on top, and then you got the outer perimeter. It's to keep people from coming in. They reminded me a whole year, I knew what they—but I thought about it, and the first thing I thought about was Viet Nam, when I saw them doing that at the Mexican border.

And also, getting back to Viet Nam, we used to—we used to--they worried about money, because when we came in the country, we had what we called greenbacks, green dollar bills. So you had to trans—swap that out for what they called “military payment certificates,” because the Vietnamese could steal the greenbacks and sell it on the black market, because you got more money, which increased their war chest. And then you guarded places. I remember about a week or so after we got in, they sent a group of us, and we had to go through this training with the 101st Airborne. They sent us through this warfare training. We had already had to go through, as cops, we had to go through specialized training before we got over there, so then we went to this other, so then they would put us on specialized duties of guard duties and stuff. I'm trying to think of what was really significant about it. That was my first year. Went through a lot of rocket attacks, a couple of ground attacks [inaudible]. I went through some incidents. Then—I'm trying to think. That's about it.

SM: What were those, like, rocket attacks like?

CT: Don't ask me.

END OF RECORDING