

Food Sovereignty in Black Washington, DC: 1950 - 2017

Reginald Washington

Oral history conducted by Dominique Hazzard
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Interviewee: Reginald Washington

Interviewer: Dominique Hazzard

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Longbranch Library

Summary:

Retired realtor Reginald Washington discusses his memories of the Kingman Park Neighborhood, his experience working in Langston Confectionary (Washington Brothers) a corner store owned by his family, his memories of protecting the store during the 1968 riots, and his thoughts on the importance of black businesses.

[00:02:30] Introductory statement and brief history of family and family store

[00:05:00] Description of the Kingman Park neighborhood in the 1940s and 1950s

[00:08:36] Description of the Langston Confectionary (Washington Brothers store) and its employees, Reginald Washington's mother, and the rigors of operating the store

[00:11:38] Description of the business of Kingman Park and Benning Road in the 1950s

[00:16:03] Description of the merchandise and business practices of Washington Brothers

[00:22:15] Memories of the customers of the Washington Brothers store

[00:27:36] Recollections of the 1968 Riots and how family and community worked together to protect the Washington Brothers store from fire and looting

[00:31:06] Aftermath of the 1968 Riots and feelings about family decision to sell the store

[00:34:34] Memories of Christmas time at the Washington Brothers store

[00:36:52] Reflections on the Impact of growing up in a neighborhood with many black businesses

[00:42:38] Memories of community trust in the 1950s, discussion of father's motivations for going into business

Hazzard: Alright so I'm recording. So can you tell us your full name?

Washington: Reginald M. Washington

Hazzard: Alright and where were you born and what year?

Washington: Born in Washington D.C. in 1941.

Hazzard: Alright and what neighborhood did you grow up in in D.C.?

Washington: It was called Kingman Park neighborhood of Northeast D.C.

Hazzard: Okay and can you tell me a little about your family, your parents, your siblings?

Washington: I have one sister, she's a couple years younger than I am. My parents are Reginald and Dorothy Washington. My mother is from Canada and my father is from D.C. They met when she came to D.C. to live with her sister and she went to high school here. She graduated from high school here. From Cardozo high school. My father graduated from Dunbar high school in D.C. They were married for over 50 years and they passed within eighteen months of one another. They opened a store, their business, retail grocery store in 1941 in

partnership with my father's brother Jim and his wife Silvia. And we operated the business for thirty years successfully until it was sold. We decided it was time to sell for a number of several reasons. Age being one of them. And crime was on the increase at that time too. [00:02:30]

Hazzard: So tell me about Kingman Park. What was it like growing up in Kingman Park in the '40s?

Washington: Kingman Park was a wonderful neighborhood for families to grow up in. We had various businesses and churches and all the schools were right together up on the hill that we used to call The Hill. Because you'd go from your elementary school on one hill, junior high on another hill and then the high school on another hill. And we also had a vocational school there. And other recreational facilities, tennis courts, ballparks. And we didn't have to cross any major streets to enjoy it really. So it was a wonderful neighborhood for families.

Hazzard: And what -- And so you were growing up there in the '40s and '50s. What type of people lived in the neighborhood?

Washington: It was a wealth of people there because segregation was still enforced and colored, negroes as we were known back then, we had certain areas where we could live. And it was restrictions until those barrier fell down. And we had doctors, lawyers, construction workers, teachers, cab drivers, people of all professions. And when the racial barriers were broken people began to move out to more expensive neighborhoods where they weren't allowed to even if you had the money. [00:05:00]

Hazzard: But your family stayed in Kingman Park?

Washington: Yes. Mhmm, right. That's where our business was. Our business was, our home was about two blocks from the business. And so it was just very convenient. Just walk to work. And my parents and my father's brother and his wife at one time they owned two stores right across the street from each other. But my uncle died prematurely and the remaining partners sold one store because it was too much, it was too much for the remaining partners to deal with both stores at that time. And we were mostly family oriented with as far as employees were concerned. And some friends and neighbors. Quite a few of the employees-- family friends, neighbors-- were part time workers because they had government jobs and they worked part time to earn extra income to raise their families. And it was a good business, a good place to work. Lot of fun. The people in the neighborhood supported us and they didn't have to because there were other businesses they could've patronized you know but they supported us. And even when many of them moved out of the neighborhood whenever they were back in the area they would come in and patronize us then. Hazzard: So tell me-- I know when I talked to Cosby he was talking about his aunt Babe?

Washington: Yes that's my mother.

Hazzard: That's your mother. Okay can you tell me a little more about her? What was she like?

Washington: She was an angel [chuckles softly]. She worked every-- in grocery business it's a seven day a week job. And we were open from like maybe 8:00 in the morning to at one time to midnight. And we gradually cut back an hour or so as time went on. And we started, when we last had the store we were closing at 9:00, but we were still opening at 8 or 9:00 in the morning. So it was still a twelve hour day or more. My mother when she would finish working at the store she would go home and fix dinner for her family and whatnot. And this was seven days a week. [00:08:36]

Hazzard: Wow.

Washington: [chuckles softly]

Hazzard: Whew. [laughs] So can you describe for me what was the area that the store was in? The streets, what was it like in the '50's or the '60's. What was kind of happening on that street?

Washington: The area like I said it was a wonderful place to raise families. And it was designed that way. We had neighborhood businesses on the main business street there which was Benning Road, is Benning Road. On Bladensburg Road we had a Sears, we had a Hechinger's Hardware, Lumber and Hardware Store. And the Hechinger Mall is still there now. But in the '40s and '50s it was just Hechinger's Lumber and Hardware Store there that took up the whole corner. We had restaurants. Some Italian restaurants, Jewish restaurants. Could get nice kosher sandwiches. Many of the businesses were Black owned. We had a Black shoe repair shop there. We had Black owned drug store there. There were several barbershops and beauty shops in the area. And a couple of, several Black owned carryouts right on Benning Road in the neighborhood. And also we had a neighborhood theatre called the Langston Theatre which no longer exists there, but could walk to the neighborhood theatre and see your Saturday features [laughs].

Hazzard: What was your favorite restaurant in the area?

Washington: My favorite restaurant in the area? I just like -- it was called Baltimore Delicatessen. That was a Jewish place where you could get your different Jewish sandwiches. And that was out of the area, Hot Shop was close by it. That was a favorite, but it wasn't exactly in Kingman Park. [00:11:38]

Hazzard: And what about grocery stores? What were the options like for if you wanted to buy fresh food?

Washington: Oh we carried fresh food. And we went to the market every day just about, to buy fresh chickens and fresh meats, vegetables, and fruits and whatnots that were delivered to us from the Florida Avenue Market that- it's still there, but it's not as large as it used to be. And that wasn't too far from us. We could go up there and pick things up ourselves or if the order was large enough it was delivered to us. So we had plenty of food to serve our neighborhood and like I said we were able to stay in business successfully for thirty years. You have to be doing

something right in order to do that, you know. Taking care of your customers and their needs because your customers take care, help take care of you.

Hazzard: So can you describe the store to me? What did it look like? How was it set up inside?

Washington: It wasn't that large. It was probably a little smaller than your average 7/11 store for today. And we had, we sold hand dipped ice cream. We had a meat section. We had a general merchandise section, your canned goods, your boxed goods. We cut our own meats there. And we had a section for the kids where we had all our candy and penny candy and whatnot. I don't think there's anymore penny candy around now [both laugh]. But if you had a nickel you could get a handful of penny candy, an assortment. And the kids loved that. And we had sodas. And we sold beer. We didn't sell wine. That was the liquor store across the street from us that sold wine and hard liquor. And like I said we were faithfully patronized and we had an assortment of food goods for our neighbors, customers you know. And we tried to keep the prices as competitive as possible. It's a small, independent business that can't outprice, underprice the chain stores because they're so large and they have that volume of buying power where they get discounts and everything. But we were competitive.

Hazzard: And so--

Washington: And the neighborhood they referred to our business as Washington Brothers because my father and his brother started it. And it was so many of the Washingtons working there. My father came from a family of nine siblings and they all had children and whatnot. And so we had a big Washington clan. [00:16:03]

Hazzard: And when did you start working in the store?

Washington: Ha. When I was a kid. When I was a kid I started sweeping the floor, help loading the shelves of stock. And just as I grew older and learned to do more, learned to do everything eventually. I started very early and quite a few of my cousins we worked together.

Hazzard: It's a very loud door. So can you tell me more about the customers at the store? What type of people--

Washington: The customers were the best, customers were the best. Like I said we had people from all walks of life. Many who were native Washingtonians, and many who migrated from the South in order to get better employment to raise their families and whatnot. It was just a cross-section of people. And during those times drugs weren't as prevalent so you didn't have that problem. Which drugs have damaged neighborhoods all across the country you know. But in the '40's and '50's you really didn't have that especially in the D.C area. My customers were the best, they were the best. We were classmates you know [laughs]. We grew up together.

Hazzard: Is there-- Is there any customers who in your memory stick out? People who were some of your favorite customers at the store?

Washington: Mmm I don't know if I want to do that [laughs]. If anyone-- anyone who came in and made a purchase was a favorite. [both laugh] And my father was adamant about respecting everybody no matter what their station in life, you know. He used to say if customer-- everybody that walks through that door is a potential purchaser, but a future customer. Someone's who's down on their luck and prosperity just came in and brought a penny worth of something. If you show that person respect he may come back and spend a nickel the next time. And then gradually move on. But don't show him respect and they won't come back, you know. That's not good for business. [00:22:15]

Hazzard: What are some of the other lessons that you feel like you learned from your father, that you learned from your experiences with the store?

Washington: Well I learned how to count [laughs], make change, handle cash, deal with people, deal with different types of people at different times in their life and how to handle the situation that came out with the best resolve. I can remember a customer having, what do you call that? He had a fit. What's the other word?

Hazzard: Like a seizure?

Washington: Seizure, he had a seizure right there in the store and it was the first time I've seen it happen. And so we had to retrain him so he wouldn't hurt himself or others. And also put something in his mouth so he wouldn't bite down on his gums and whatnot. And we called the emergency ambulance or whatnot, but we had to help him as best we could until the emergency people came there you know. And they took him to the hospital.

We were able to survive the riots of '68 and most businesses didn't make it because everything was on fire. And people were closing up their businesses because things were-- it was a mob scene, a mob scene. I've never seen anything like it. Look out the front door and all the neighbors' doors were on fire, you know. And I decided-- and my cousin-- that we weren't going to close the store because we thought that would just make that too attractive for the mob scene. And we didn't. We just kept the store open all night. And it was a store next to us and one of the mobs set that store on fire. And we thought that was going to spread, but some of the neighbors, you could hear them yelling "The store next to Washington Brothers is on fire, we gotta put it out so they won't burn Washington Brothers!" And they went over there and were using sodas and milk to put out the fire, bottles of sodas and milk and orange juice, fruit juice things like that. Anything liquid.

Hazzard: They were getting it from out the store? From out the store?

Washington: Yeah they went in the store to put the fire out. The store had been broken into you see what I'm saying. Because even though the places had bars on them, they just pulled the bars off because it was a mob scene, mob scene. And it was scary too. So then the Coast Guard-- not the Coast Guard.

Hazzard: National Guard?

Washington: National Guard. Then the National Guard was sent out, the city authorities had the National Guard to come out plus the police were there in the street too. So what I did was start making coffee and I set up a coffee stop for all the service guys [laughs] who were patrolling. So they got, I gave them free coffee and donuts and cupcakes and things like that. So word got out so every five minutes a humvee was pulling up to the store front. And that kept the bad guys away [both laugh].

Hazzard: Smart [they keep laughing]

Washington: Yeah that was me, Cosby, and Cosby's friend. And the next day when my parents got up they came on down and relieved us, went up to the house and just I slept most of the day. Because I was up like 24 hours. And for, think it was weeks and months we were the only viable grocery store in the area. Not just in our area, but other areas, neighboring areas because everybody else had been destroyed. And yeah.

Hazzard: So you were in the store when the riots broke out?

Washington: Yeah

Hazzard: What were you thinking? Did you know what was going on?

Washington: Yeah [wry chuckle] I could see what was going on, they were ransacking all the businesses because everybody had closed with the exception of us. And I'm pretty certain that if we hadn't stayed open we would've been also destroyed, you know ransacked. [00:27:36]

Hazzard: So what was it like in those months after the riot when you all were the only store?

Washington: It was a lot of hard work. Lot of long hours. We had a line outside the door from the time we opened to the time we closed. We had to rent a box truck to go to the, to the markets to get everything that used to be delivered because those businesses weren't venturing out into our, into the neighborhoods that were affected for a while until things got settled. So it was a lot of work, a lot of work.

And then gradually businesses were able to re-open and some of them never did. And it's also when a number of Blacks were able to get hold of some retail businesses because the owners whose businesses were destroyed, they were elderly, they were old you know and that meant that they had to start all over again from scratch. And that wasn't the age for them to do that. So that's when like I said a number of Blacks were able to get ahold of some retail businesses.

Hazzard: And did the city help you all in any way kind of get back on your feet or rebuild the store?

Washington: Well our store wasn't damaged so we didn't, we didn't get any help from the city because it wasn't necessary. Whether other businesses got some help from the city, I'm not

sure. They got some help from their insurance companies because they were carrying insurance and then after the riots insurance rates went up quite a bit too for retail businesses.

Hazzard: So your family you said ran this store for about 30 years?

Washington: That's correct.

Hazzard: What do you remember about the decision to sell the store?

Washington: It wasn't something I was in favor of. Imma leave it like that. [00:31:06]

Hazzard: Let's see. So after the store closed what was next for you?

Washington: Well my father and I went into real estate. And we stayed in real estate for about the next 15, 16 years I think. We went with a Black real estate company by the name of John R Pinkett Inc. They're no longer in businesses after the, after the principals who were senior citizens they decided to just sell their assets and just close the business down because there wouldn't have been any more family members running their business because the kids had all become, gone into other professions. So I'm a retired realtor and that's my story.

Hazzard: [chuckles] So let's see. What's one of your favorite memories of the store?

Washington: Probably Christmas time because we went all out in decorating the store, the front window and whatnot with Christmas decorations and it used to be a vacant lot at the corner of the block there. And every Christmas a couple of brothas they set up a Christmas tree stand. And so that corner was just really festive at that time, you know. And we used to get our Christmas trees from the Christmas tree guy every year. He set one -- My father would go out and pick one and he'd set it aside until we were ready to take it up the house. And everybody was in you know a festive, jolly mood and the store looked good with all the decorations we put up. And I'm through. [00:34:34]

Hazzard: Can I ask you one more question?

Washington: Mhmm.

Hazzard: So you mentioned in the beginning that there were so many kind of Black owned businesses in Kingman Park and the surrounding areas. What do you think is the impact, how did having that many Black-owned businesses around impact the community and impact your experience growing up in the area?

Washington: Oh it was wonderful because you had someone that looked like you that had their own business. It wasn't just the other people who weren't even living in the neighborhood but profiting from the neighborhood. And I know that inspired people that grew up in the neighborhood to pursue going into business in some form for themselves. Because I've been told that by-- So it was a big influence. It was a big influence. You had people of your own race

who were thriving with their own businesses. And that encouraged others to give it a try. Not just the others could run, manage a retail business. [00:36:52]

Hazzard: Great. Well thank you so much Mr. Washington.

Washington: I thank you.

Hazzard: Alright

[pause, flipping through papers]

Washington: Part of the cases of dairy products. Because the dairy people they start working deliveries like 5:00 in the morning, something like that. So at that time they would leave their products here at the front door. And like I said it would be there when the store was opening up at 8:00. And if anything was missing there would be a note in the crate, "Mr. Washington I got a quart of milk. I'll be in to see you when you open." Or there would be money for the product. You can't do that now.

Hazzard: Money? [laughs]

Washington: Yes, money.

Hazzard: Wow. That's something.

Hazzard: Did your father ever talk about why he decided to make that move from being a butcher to opening his own business?

Washington: When he was a kid he worked at the Jewish neighborhood stores. And he said he saw how the Jewish families came into our neighborhoods. Couldn't speak English. He had to speak-- he had to be like an interpreter for them. And he saw how they just worked together and saved and prospered and moved on. And that's what influenced him to want to go into business because he got his degrees in the field of education, but he said he was always was just going to use that for a stepping stone to get into business. I guess make some money or whatever. And he had to borrow some money too.

Hazzard: So he saw that and then they decided to get together and do the same thing. Save up. And just prosper together. That's awesome.

Washington: Our uncle died when he was 43. See this [Langston Confectionary] is the name of the store, the business name. But in the community we were known as Washington Brothers.

Hazzard: Washington Brothers.

Washington: That's where I grew up. It was a picture, I guess Lorraine didn't find that one. There was a picture when I think I was about maybe 5 years old and I was up on the little ladder and my mother was marking the canned goods and handing them to me to put up on the shelf.

Hazzard: Now was her nickname Bay or Babe?

Washington: Babe. B-A-B-E.

Hazzard: That's what I thought. I was transcribing an interview and I couldn't quite tell, but I was like it's probably Babe.

Washington: And she got that nickname because she was the youngest of her family. She came from a family of nine siblings also and so my father likewise had nine siblings. So they both didn't want a large family because they were fully aware of the struggles you know.

Hazzard: Mhmm

Washington: They just both wanted two you know. Not a large family.

Hazzard: And can I ask where you went to school?

Washington: College or high school?

Hazzard: Both

Washington: I went to college at Morgan State University. I graduated from Spingarn High in D.C. That's in the Kingman Park area. [00:42:38]

[end of interview]

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