

**Kansas Historical Society**  
**Oral History Project**  
**Brown v Board of Education**

Interview being conducted with Maurita Davis by Jean Vandelinder on July 15, 1994.

Int            Would you give me your full name?

MD            Maurita Burnett Davis.

Int            What is your place and date of birth?

MD            October 8, 1923, 1522 Quincy St., Topeka, KS

Int            So you were born at home then?

MD            Yes, in those days.

Int            What was your mother's maiden name?

MD            Nina Jones from Perry, KS.

Int            When was she born, do you have any idea?

MD            I do have, probably on her obituary, right this minute...

Int            Do you know where her family came from? Had they lived there a while in Perry?

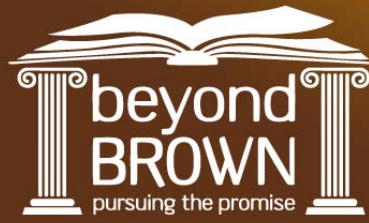
MD            Yes, they had lived there a while. My great-grandmother, which would be her grandmother, came from Holland. She married a man in Bonner Springs, this was my grandmother, who had Negro and Indian, and that basically is her family, that I know about. That means my great-grandmother was from Holland, and as I say, she lived in Bonner Springs.

Int            Your mother is no longer living?

MD            No.

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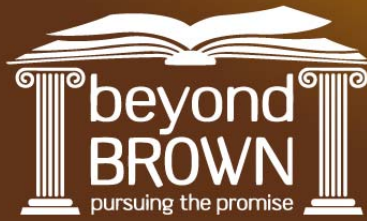
Int            When did she pass away?

MD            About 13 years ago.

Int            Is she buried in Topeka?

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- MD I believe she is buried in Perry. Well, really, Oskaloosa, KS. Oskaloosa is a little town right there. My father was from Oskaloosa; my mother was from Perry. The highway went down the road and on one side were the Burnetts and on the other side was the Joneses.
- Int What was your father's full name?
- MD McKinley Langford Burnett.
- Int He was born in Oskaloosa?
- MD Yes.
- Int What about his family?
- MD He traced his heritage back. He went back to Tennessee, his father or grandfather was a slave. He traced his family back until he got to the Stokeley Bean Company and I guess that's where he quit. They were from Tennessee.
- Int Did they happen to come during the exodus in 1879? You know the great exodus.
- MD I don't remember when he came, I really don't know. I would need to ask one of my sisters who keeps with that.
- Int Your father, when did he pass away?
- MD I'll have to get it later.
- Int I just need to know the names of your brothers and sisters.
- MD Malcolm Lauren, Maxine Viola, Marcella Louise and Marcus Lynn, and mine was Maurita Lois. All our names were ML. Someone asked my mother if she did that intentionally, because its ML after my father, but she didn't notice it until she got to the third or fourth child, so she kept it up.
- Int I'll start out asking questions about you and then if you want to add things about your father and his role in all of this, that's fine. Tell me a little bit about your experience going to school in Topeka and what that was like, and

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where you actually went to school. You were explaining before about where you went to grade school.

MD I went to grade school at Monroe and we lived next door to Monroe. Of course, you know that was all black. When I left Monroe I went to Crane Junior High. We didn't go until we were in the 9th grade, we only spent one year in middle school, but the Caucasian children spent three years there.

Int And that wasn't segregated?

MD No, there were four grade schools in Topeka, four black grade schools, and any place kind of outside the city, like in the county, was integrated, because I had cousins that lived, I guess it was right outside the city. At one time, everybody was integrated, because some friends of mine that are my age, one friend was going to Sumner, in fact Charles Scott, one of the lawyer's wives, says that Monroe was not the first school integrated, but I do know that this girl used to go to Sumner and then she was changed to Buchanan which was the black school.

Int Do you know why that happened, because I've heard that from others.

MD No, I don't. I don't know why that happened. When they were working on the school case, because it was much after that, they found that the textbooks were different. But the reason to separate them right then, I really don't know. Now, I know what happened in the Kansas City schools, see we had a black high school here and a black junior high; the only two in Kansas.

Int What was the black junior high?

MD Northeast. My children went there and Sumner.

Int Before it became a magnet school.

MD Yes. There was an incident of a black boy killed a Caucasian, that was the reason for that separation. I know \_\_\_\_\_ mentioned when she was here at the library that Sumner was started because of the interest in their children's education, but that wasn't so.

Int Any time you want me to turn this off.

MD I didn't want to call her name. But she had that fact mixed up, that was not the reason.

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Int Do you know when this was?

MD No, I did not live here then. You see, that's how Esther Brown got interested in the case because the children that lived in Meriam had to come clear to Sumner, and she got involved in that.

Int Getting back to Monroe school, what were some of the differences that you were aware of between the school you went to and whites?

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MD You know, my parents were not the kind that kept anything like that. (tape was turned off). I was speaking of the way we were treated. The teachers were not too, some of them, I won't say all of them, but some of them were not too cordial to us. I do remember a cousin that went to another one of the black schools, a teacher grabbed her (and my cousin was blond) and told her to get on back to the back of the line, I don't like the looks of you anywhere. But, you see, that was because of my father, and she had nothing to do, so there were some intimidations. Right this minute, I can't really remember anything that happened to me other than I believe I told about the psychiatrist taking me. (Some talk here while looking at pictures) But, we were a very different looking family.

Int Yes, you were. Did anybody in your family pass or not? Not in Topeka but like somewhere else?

MD Oh, yes. When I first came here to Kansas City, the Negro beauticians could do my hair, so I would go to the white places to have my hair done. I probably did not tell the story of Hallmark. I applied for a job at Hallmark after I had been to Washington, DC, working in the government, and I came home, I worked in the Office for Emergency Management, the War Production Board, all those agencies were set up during the war. I guess they no longer have them. I worked in the library and I was sent to a library school. Really, when I came home from school in Indiana, and I was going to a government school there in Topeka, just for the summer, and the teacher told us that some of us needed to take the test for the government school. Two of us were asked to come to Washington. I worked in this library and found it very interesting. I had taken a test when I first went to Washington and I placed in the library. I came remember back, you know, things like this don't mean anything to you at the time, but I can remember as child I would put a number in my father's books and a card in. So, when I took this test, I tested for the library. They sent me to school. After I got into it, I was not really aware at the time of library science, so I wanted to come home and go to study library science. When I got to Topeka I found that the only school in the state of Kansas who taught library science was Emporia, and of course it was mid-semester, so I went up to Hallmark. They advertise every day for workers, I'll go up there and get a job and work until the beginning of the semester. When they interviewed me, oh yes, we are so happy to have you, Ms. Burnett, been to Washington and that sounded big time to them. I had worked about, maybe half a day, and someone from personnel office came up to me and began to question me about my name and how you spelled and different things, and she finally said they would like to see you in the office. They told me they were sorry, Ms. Burnett, but we cannot hire you, of course they had already hired me so they were firing

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me now, because we don't hire Negroes at Hallmark. What I was doing, that was before automation, I was just sticking a little piece of lace up under a little girl's dress and I said a nitwit could do it, I don't know why in the world, then, I was younger then and I just put my arm up beside her and said I'm just as white as you so what difference does it make. But, anyway it made a difference, and I could not work anymore. I didn't even work a half day. When I got home, a neighbor was there and she said, oh, I knew you would be coming, and she had been to her church club and she mentioned that I was home and I had just gone to work at Hallmark. Some lady said, what, I'm going to call up there, and so this lady did call and asked if they hired Negroes and they said no and she said well, you have one working there. So, that's the reason they fired me. Would you know now, a little boy that was raised three doors, with my son, is personnel management at Hallmark here in Kansas City. You know, I didn't think too much of it then but I began to wonder why in the world my father didn't take this to the NAACP.

Int When did you father get involved with the NAACP? Not president, but when did he become a member?

MD Ever since I can remember. I think I mentioned, but he had worked on civil rights ever since I can remember. When the Jones family came from slavery, understand the story was told to me, that in those days in slavery they let the light Negroes sleep longer than the dark. This day the Joneses had planned to slip away and wherever they were it was by a river and the master came and asked where the Joneses were and they said, well, they are sleeping, and they had the shade pulled down but they had slipped down the river.

Int So, your father then was active . . .

MD When he was in school in Oskaloosa, he said every time they got ready to have a play or a program, they would want him to dance and he didn't like that at all, because they thought all Negroes could dance. I don't know if that's when he became interested, because he said he stayed in the guard house most the time when he was in the service, for writing to the president or somebody about

Int During World War I

MD Yes . . . about segregation. But he has always worked for civil rights.

Int Were his parents that way?

MD Not that I know of. When they would ask him to dance, he resented that and that was an offense to him. When he went to the service, it was just about the

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same thing. He didn't appreciate being segregated. He was in the cavalry. In Topeka, we could not go to the theaters. Well, if we went to the white theaters, we had to sit up in the balcony. My father resented that and he did not want us to go, but I was young and dating and so I just wanted to go.

Int So, getting back to going to Monroe. You mentioned that you didn't have certain things that the white schools had, like gym.

MD See, we didn't go to junior high until we were in the 9th grade, which only gave us one year, where the others were there in the 7th grade.

Int So, you didn't have home ec?

MD We did have home ec, but we didn't have gym, like swimming, and of course, during that time, it was also found out that the textbooks were different. After they settled that case, then they started on the big case to do away with the whole system.

Int So, there was a lawsuit brought about the textbooks?

MD Yes, there was a lawsuit, that was just one of things that they used, but that was their complaint, and it was really the fact that they should go to the junior high school just like the other children, there shouldn't be any difference in when you go.

Int Was that the Graham case then?

MD Yes, you're right, that was the Graham case.

Int Was the NAACP involved in that or was that just an individual that brought suit?

MD I really can't remember. It seems to be the NAACP was, but of course it's the name. I remember my father working on that, too, but I can't remember whether the NAACP actually filed the case or not.

Int Where were you when the so-called Brown litigation was going on?

MD I was here in Kansas City. Next door lived a principal of a grade school, black grade school. The children right across the street from me were Caucasian and they went to a school called Hawthorne, and in 1954 was when my son went to kindergarten and I don't believe but there was one other black child that went to school that year. I don't know why, but the people were afraid that the

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teachers would not be nice to the children. They were afraid the white teachers would not be nice to the children. That was never my fear and the two of them got along just fine. So, the next year, and there was only a year's difference between my two oldest children, all the children came, or many more came. Mrs. Sparks was the principal and I just took my little girl and pushed her in the door and I left, because I figured they were going to tell me to take her back home, so I just pushed her in and came on back home. Sure enough, I hadn't been here but five minutes and Mrs. Sparks did call me and tell me to come and get her.

Mr. Bassett was the principal of a grade school and he said the superintendent had told him in a meeting to turn away a new student rather than a brother or sister of an old student. So, I told Mrs. Sparks, now you are not minding anybody. The Supreme Court told you not to segregate because of race, and the superintendent told you not to segregate because of family. I really felt sorry for her because she was just doing what she was told. I left her there and everything was okay.

The Baptist Convention always met in September, right at the beginning of school, and there was no minister here, I think at that a minister was the president of NAACP, and they were gone. So, I called my father and said there was nobody here for me to call and I don't know what to do. He just said to be there and keep the children there. You know, after it's all said and done, I don't know if it was too good or not, because all the rest of the children that they played with were going down here to the black school, and I sent mine up to the integrated school, which is all black now.

Int How long have you lived here?

MD 30 or 40 years now. My husband was a member of the Kansas legislature for 15 years and his district only went to 18th Street, so there wasn't anyplace to move, and after that, he was a commissioner and his district was further out and we were going to move, but he died so I just stayed.

(tape turned)

Int When did it really start in Topeka, the actual decision to go ahead, to desegregate the schools and to fight?

MD It tells in Simple Justice, the board, my father. The Sawyer girl, her father was very active, and what they would do is they were trying to get the board to

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desegregate without going to court. I don't remember my father ever taking a vacation. He would take all his leave time to meet the board on Monday morning at 8 a.m. when he was supposed to be at work. It also tells in Simple Justice how he asked them if they would desegregate and one school board member said, when he said well, after all, I pay a nickel for a loaf bread, I pay my taxes just like you, so why can't the children all go to school together. One member asked if that was an ultimatum and he said if so, let's just settle this now and let's go outside and fight. They met with the board, that's the way they tried to work with the board, and they just couldn't get any place. In fact, the first case they lost, I believe. They had one case they lost, but they just kept on until they won. Of course, you know there were other cases, like the South Carolina case, and some of those people probably went through much more than the people in Topeka. In Topeka it was more a subtle something.

Int Subtle racism.

MD Yes, because there was a girl here my age, we came here about the same time, her husband is president of Douglas Bank, and some of our friends would say that Barbara says that there wasn't anything wrong in Topeka. Why all this, and this was during the time of Brown v. Topeka was going on, and a lot of people were not even aware, but my father was. As long as it is not blatant, okay. Now, here in Kansas City, you couldn't even try on clothes at Woolf Brothers at one time. It wasn't that way in Topeka. Say, for instance, maybe you couldn't clerk in a store but you could run the elevator. Well, what kind of a job is that, and you had to look a certain way to run the elevator. But, people didn't pay that too much attention. Like going to the movie. My father did not like the idea of us going to the movies, but it didn't matter to me. One time there was a movie, they had a special showing for the Negroes, no one was to go but the Negroes, and my father, I remember it was Thanksgiving day because he was cooking dinner, and he got in the car and went up and sat to see how many came that day, and not very many came. We could go to the black theater, which was on 4th street, but the Grand was the only other one.

Like the letter says, nobody had ever asked for a job other than janitor work. He says right there, that nobody had ever requested. My father would look in the paper and wherever he would see an application for a job he would write to the company and ask, and you see the response that he got. They hadn't ever thought of it or had never had a request. My father first worked at the Santa Fe shops as a carpenter and the blacks did not go in the Santa Fe shops until they had a strike and that's when they first hired Negroes.

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Then, my father worked at the Veterans Hospital and I have a certificate here that he received. His supervisor could not, my father had to read the day's orders to him because he could not read, and he was the supervisor, where he could not have the job of supervisor. There were only just certain jobs that they could have.

Int How much education did your father have?

MD He, of course, finished high school, but he took many courses in law and this course was given at KU; as far as actual credits are concerned, I don't really know, but he was a man that constantly improved himself. He took correspondence law and at one time he taught Negro history and public speaking, that was on the WPA, that was a Work Progress Administration that was set up during Roosevelt's time, but it had all kinds of jobs, and this building in Wyandotte County lake, it was built during those days. I didn't know that until it was dedicated to my husband. I didn't know it didn't have a name until they dedicated it. My father taught Negro history and public speaking during those days.

Int He wasn't working for the Santa Fe then, at the time of Brown?

MD No, he was ill and had to stop working at Santa Fe, and then he went into the government. They built Winter General Hospital and he started working there and he worked there until he retired.

Int Did he know Oliver Brown? Did he go to the same church?

MD Oh, yes, I knew him; I went to school with him. And his wife Leola went to Monroe school. He did belong to the NAACP, but he was not an active member and I understand that he was a Methodist minister and I understand that he got up at a Methodist church and said that he was sorry he ever got involved. Of course, if he was living today, he probably wouldn't say that, but he was sorry the he ever, I guess even let them use his name.

Int You must have known some of the other plaintiffs then?

MD Oh, yes, I knew a lot of them. One lady that was at KU I remember, but when she spoke, I remember all she said was, it wasn't easy. They just had to ask people, can we use your name, that's how it was, can we use your name.

Int Where they actually lived made a difference too, right?

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MD Yes, you had to pass a school. That's why we, because we lived next door to Monroe, so we didn't pass any school. If he could have used us, it probably would have been filed long ago. There was one girl, and I saw her name on the panel, and she told me, and it was in one paper, they had nothing to do with anything and she said I hear some of them are saying, but she said that's the reason I don't ever go because what am I going to tell. It seems like to me . . . she said they met in a little dingy room, evidently maybe one time they must have gotten together for them to sign their names or whatever, but it wasn't any NAACP meeting or anything. They gave her quite a spiel. It's amazing, but as I say, it was not my intention to straighten out history.

Int Given the number of plaintiffs there were, why do you think it was Oliver Brown who was picked?

MD There have been several different tales. One is they went alphabetical. Well, there was another Brown. Okay, we asked the girl that was the secretary to the Scotts at that time, and she said, I cannot tell you why, it was just a quirk, just a quirk. She said, maybe, people don't always alphabetize right and maybe they looked at Brown, Linda, and didn't see Darlene. She had no more to do with it than anybody else. They tell me they really are getting some money from it, because the lady who wrote the article in the Topeka paper told me, she said, it disgusts me so because people call me from all over the United States, where is Linda Brown. My brother said, what are they listening to, what are they saying. He said I believe that people don't want to admit they've been duped, because they can't be telling anything. When I was at a symposium in June at KU at the law school, Cheryl will not let Linda say anything without her being there, and I can see why if she says the civil rights movement started with Brown. Like I say, that shows what they know. What are they telling people that they are so intrigued.

I worked as librarian here in Kansas City for the school board for about 20 years, and the head librarian wants to make a CD, and she wants to get it recorded.

Int Did you know Esther Brown at all?

MD Not really, I have met her.

Int I have met one of her daughters who lives in New York and I was there and she is trying to write something. Her daughter is Susan Tucker.

MD Someone came to see me who is writing a book, Lois Nettleton.

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Int Esther tried to desegregate the schools in Wichita.

MD Yes, first, before she . . .

Int Do you know what happened with that or why she . . . ?

MD It tells it in \_\_\_\_\_, she couldn't

Int He just says that the black teachers were strong enough to keep her out.

MD Well, you see that's the way it was. He also tells in there about the teachers in Topeka. They got together and worked against the NAACP. The woman who is on the cover of the Maturity magazine, Mamie Williams, she lives right up on the corner, she would not even belong to the NAACP and also said that she did not think she was qualified to teach white children, and she had taught in a college. They were very hostile. When Deborah tells about how the teachers were all so family oriented, they would see them at church, that wasn't our experience. They weren't like family to us, they were very hostile. I do remember my brother told me about this when we went to lunch, they took me to a psychiatrist, the school board, without my parents knowing it, and asked me about my mother and father, what they were. I think I told that, and when they asked me what my mother was, I said she's a white woman. My brother said, you should have straightened that out, because that left the impression, she wasn't white. I didn't think about that, that was just a child, I was just going by what they looked like. I said my father was a pure bred African, and you can see what he looks like. In fact, when he was in the hospital, he was in the hospital when the case went to court, and I went for him, I was there. The doctor asked him what was wrong, seemingly he was nervous, and he said, well, I'll tell you a case that I'm very interested in is going on right now. He asked why he was so interested, wasn't he Jewish, and my father did look Jewish.

Isn't it amazing how we make so much difference. In fact, I have begun to say that it seems to be now that we are celebrating our differences more than our unity. I just don't see the point.

Int They want to go back to segregating.

MD That's right, they want to go back. I just don't get it.

Int Which meeting did you go to when your father was in the hospital?

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MD I went to the case, I was there at the case. That's the reason I'm saying it didn't last any time.

Int This was before the three judges, in the district court, do you remember?

MD I guess it would have been the district court in Topeka. A lawyer came to try the case from New York the, because Charles didn't have of . . .

Int Probably Robert Carter. I interviewed him when I was in New York. He's a federal judge.

MD That's right. Daddy would have him come speak.

Int What about after Brown. What kinds of things was your father involved in? What kind of causes?

MD After that, just the same things. We couldn't go to the beauty parlors, we couldn't eat in the stores. That was one of the things that they fought for, to eat in the stores.

Int It looks like he was concerned with economics.

MD He was way back then, but there wasn't much help.

Int When do you think the civil rights movement started?

MD All I can say is about him and of my life time. He worked on it all the time that I knew about, and I'm sure that there is some older than me who can remember. I think what really got it off was when Truman desegregated the armed forces. Remember, they were segregated then. When I was taking some courses here, I really wore it out, every paper I wrote on Brown v. Topeka, and one of the main things that I mention is when the Negroes came back from fighting overseas, they would have to guard prisoners of war, German prisoners of war, when they were eating in restaurants where they couldn't eat. They had been over there fighting for their country and still couldn't eat in those restaurants, but they would have to guard the POWs, the enemy. I just don't dwell on it, I never have, but I guess that is kind of hard to take. Also, when I was working in Topeka at the Veterans Hospital, and I worked for the dietitian. She was from New York and the officers could not eat in the mess hall, they had to go out in the city to eat. So, the black officers asked her permission to eat in the mess hall and she said, well, no, why should I let them eat anymore than anybody else. I told her, have you ever noticed, you don't

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see any Negroes eating in restaurants out in Topeka. They can't eat in the restaurants. There were some restaurants that would have Negroes served in the back. She said, I never noticed that. So, then she allowed them to eat.

That's one reason why in the south I think they made more progress than we did up here, because they told you right out what you couldn't do. Here it was more subtle. Since there were more Negroes in the south, they had their own businesses and it was much easier and their businesses would prosper. Whereas here, in Topeka, they didn't have that many businesses.

Int            You went to Topeka High, right?

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MD I can remember, we had dances, they called them Sunlights, my boyfriend crashed the Sunlight because he thought we should be able to go. We couldn't go. We had a black king and a white king; a black queen and white queen. We had the white basketball team and a black basketball team. I don't know if there are any pictures of Oliver Brown anywhere. I don't remember there being a black proctor; they sat during study halls, they sat at each intersection. You had to have a pass and you had to show it to a proctor. If that had been my father, he would have been up there wanting to get into that. But I didn't pay it any attention. It was very segregated, but you know, I enjoyed it.

Tape ended

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