

## **Interview with Aurora and Doris Alexander**

MODERATOR: We are at the American Labor Museum, Botto House National Landmark in Haledon, New Jersey. Our museum, a museum of immigrants' and workers' stories. We have an opportunity to speak today with two women who are New Jersians now and have agreed to share their family's immigration story and their personal stories with us. So for the next hour or so I have the pleasure of being with the Alexander Sisters and we will begin our oral history interview. If I can ask you to please introduce yourselves again to me and to our viewers.

AURORA ALEXANDER: My name is Aurora Alexander.

MODERATOR: And your sister is?

DORIS ALEXANDER: I am Doris Alexander.

MODERATOR: Doris Alexander. Can you tell us where you live now? Where you currently reside.

AURORA ALEXANDER: In Long Branch, New Jersey.

DORIS ALEXANDER: For the past 15 years. Formerly from Brooklyn, New York. Can't forget that.

MODERATOR: Long Branch. Can you tell us your full names? You have middle names? Where did your names come from? Where did you get your names?

AURORA ALEXANDER: Aurora came from my grandmother. It is Aurora Constance Elise Alexander. Aurora was my grandmother. Constance was my great aunt and Elise – when I was baptized, my aunt, great aunt, said Elise. It was supposed to be Constance Aurora instead of Aurora Constance and she said it sounded like Constant Roaring so she put the Elise in there.

MODERATOR: And what is your full name Doris?

DORIS ALEXANDER: Doris Maude Alexander. And I believe my name, middle name, came from one of the generations that preceded me. However, growing up there was a cartoon in the daily newspapers and there was a Maude the donkey and I never particularly liked to have my name, my middle name. It was always Doris M. Alexander.

MODERATOR: Could you tell us where you were born and when?

AURORA ALEXANDER: I was born in New York City on August 17, 1920.

MODERTOR: And Doris, where and when were you born?

DORIS ALEXANDER: Manhattan, New York City, September 21, 1921. Nine, 21, 21.

MODERATOR: Very nice. I'd like to talk about your ancestors; your parents, your grandparents and your heritage. Who was the first member of your family or members of your family to immigrate to the United States?

DORIS ALEXANDER: I'll let Aurora speak on that. She is the historian of the family. Collecting most of the information that we will be talking about.

MODERATOR: When did they come?

AURORA ALEXANDER: They came, I believe in 1899. April 1899. My grandfather came and brought his family. My grandfather, and grandmother and three children. He had four children. The one child did not come. She never came to the United States. Just the three.

MODERATOR: And what was your grandfather's name?

AURORA ALEXANDER: Henry Adolphus Branch.

DORIS ALEXANDER: And we always called him Papa.

MODERATOR: And what year was he born? Do you know when your grandfather was born?

AURORA ALEXANDER: I don't have the paper. Can you get the paper? [Footsteps]

MODERATOR: Oh! How old was he when he came here? Do you know? In 1899 around.

AURORA ALEXANDER: Where's the...

DORIS ALEXANDER: You don't have to give the exact age. An approximate. I'd say in his 30s. Perhaps in his 30s.

MODERATOR: And why did his family decide to leave and come to the United States?

AURORA ALEXANDER: I believe – they never told us – but my great aunt, Marie Clairmont (sp), the sister of my grandmother, I believe she came first and she probably told him of the great opportunities in the United States. So he came with his family.

MODERATOR: I see. And the family. He and his family came to the United States from...

AURORA ALEXANDER: From Barbados, British, West Indies and settled in Brooklyn, New York.

MODERATOR: And they settled in Brooklyn. And how did they arrive? How did they travel here?

AURORA ALEXANDER: They came by boat and I think the boat took two weeks to get here. They came on the Fontabelle (sp). The name of the boat was the Fontabelle (sp).

MODERATOR: Did the family ever talk about the trip here? What it was like? If they were excited or frightened or what their experience was?

AURORA ALEXANDER: Well, in the West Indies they send my grandmother...all the male children that were born, they sent them all to the West Indies to go to school. And they all came back at the age of 12 – well just before the age of 12. The reason they picked that number is because at 12 you have to pay full fare. So they came. They were just going to be 12. And my brother Cecil was sent to the West Indies until he was 12. We never saw him at all until he was 12 years old. He talked about the ship rocking and things like that, but he never said he had any trouble. But we did have a cousin, Iris Cousins (sp). She was here and she was going back to Barbados to visit. And the ship sank and she lost her life. And she was carrying a dog, which my great aunt, Clairmont -- the first one here -- gave her a dog to take back and supplies and clothing and whatnot. And the ship sank. It was the Vespus (sp). The Vespus (sp) sank. I remember that day so well. So very well.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Oh yes, I remember that too.

AURORA ALEXANDER: And a man who was on the ship, who was saved, said that he saw her hanging, clinging on the side of the ship. She refused to get into a lifeboat and the ship went down and she went down with the ship.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Whether it was true or not, they rumored that there were sharks. It was a shark infested area of the water and many of the passengers were eaten.

MODERATOR: Lost their lives.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Yes.

MODERATOR: And do you know why your aunt may not have wanted to have gotten onto a lifeboat?

AURORA ALEXANDER: No.

AURORA ALEXANDER: But we visited the West Indies since then and we met her children. And we know the children. Because she was going back to see her children and was taking all of these clothing and whatnot to the children back home in Barbados.

MODERATOR: Now your grandfather, when he arrived here with his family, he settled in New York City.

ALEXANDER SISTERS: Brooklyn.

MODERATOR: In Brooklyn. Did he begin working right away on his own? Did someone help him find work? How did the family support itself? When they first arrived.

DORIS ALEXANDER: We were small at that time. I don't remember exactly how, but I know that he was never unemployed. He started to work and if he did not open his own shop he was working for someone else. Fulton Street, which was very close and it was like a main street that ran through Brooklyn which was where most of the industry, industrial centers were. So I know that he went over to Fulton Street every day. But as a child he always left money for us on the bureau of his room. Pennies. So that you knew that when you came home from school that you looked on the bureau and got your penny.

AURORA ALEXANDER: If you were good that day. If you did good in school.

MODERATOR: You got a reward. Very nice. Did your grandfather have education?

AURORA ALEXANDER: Yes. They all had education.

MODERATOR: And how much education did your grandfather have?

AURORA ALEXANDER: Well at that time I believe it was...

DORIS ALEXANDER: It would be comparable to high school. College was not heard of in those days.

MODERATOR: Yes. The opportunity for college was not as common.

DORIS ALEXANDER: But the education in Barbados was of a much higher standard. Probably equal to anything they would have had here in our colleges. Their high school level was of that caliber.

MODERATOR: And the language of Barbados is English.

ALEXANDER SISTERS: English.

MODERATOR: So his language skills were very easy in New York City.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Yes. Absolutely.

MODERATOR: Did he and his family settle in a community of other immigrants from Barbados in Brooklyn?

DORIS ALEXANDER: Yes because when they arrived, when the subsequent people came from Barbados, somehow they knew exactly where most of the – they used to call them Bajans – lived so that they also went to that area. So that, sooner or later they were all in an area of about 20 blocks. But they spread out as they got used to the area, you know America.

AURORA ALEXANDER: I was going to say, eventually when he was putting the pennies out, my father, my grandfather worked in a real estate office with another man, Mr. King. Jones King came from Barbados also. They had the real estate office together. Across the street I remember a printer. His name was Wilkinson. My grandfather used to go over there and I guess he picked up his printing skills that he had in Barbados and used it over there. So he had printing and real estate.

MODERATOR: You speak of your grandfather as though you lived in the same house with him. As though you grew up with him. Your parents, can you give me your parents'...Tell us their names and where they were born.

AURORA ALEXANDER: My mother was born in Barbados and my father was born in British Guiana, Demerara.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Our mother's name was Anis. Anis.

AURORA ALEXANDER: Anis Adelaide

DORIS ALEXANDER: Anis Adelaide Branch Alexander

AURORA ALEXANDER: And my mother and father married in New York in 1918 I believe. I have the wedding certificate and the papers. I didn't bring that.

MODERATOR: And your father's first name?

ALEXANDER SISTERS: Cecil.

MODERATOR: Cecil.

AURORA ALEXANDER: He was a pianist. Pianist that is. Pianist.

MODERATOR: And your mother. Did she have an occupation or a vocation?

ALEXANDER SISTERS: Dressmaking.

MODERATOR: She was a dress maker. I know you brought some photographs, which, the one in your hand includes your grandfather. Could you tell us, hold up the photo and tell us who is in the photo?

AURORA ALEXANDER: That is me and Doris and Aunt Alice. Aunt Alice is my uncle's first wife. He came with my grandfather. He was one of the children my grandfather brought. And I believe she was born in Cuba. She was born in Cuba.

MODERATOR: And your grandfather.

AURORA ALEXANDER: Our grandfather. [unintelligible] Uh-huh.

MODERATOR: Do you know where that photo was taken?

AURORA ALEXANDER: After they came here they bought one house and that was the house they lived in all – until 1940-something. My Aunt Vi and aunt – they were called Auntie – they bought this big house. It had five stories and everyone lived in that house. Well, not everyone. We lived in Manhattan. Then Mother got married and Mother went to Manhattan. The picture of a lady holding a little boy; that's my father's aunt holding my younger brother. Because at that time our older brother was in Barbados. Those are the four here.

MODERATOR: What year was that taken? I see a year written on the front.

AURORA ALEXANDER: I don't know exactly. I think I put.

MODERATOR: Is that a little year right there?

AURORA ALEXANDER: 1940s.

MODERATOR: 1940s. Your grandfather looks very distinguished. Did he dress that way all the time.

ALEXANDER SISTERS: Oh yes. Always. All the time.

MODERATOR: He always wore a suit and tie?

AURORA ALEXANDER: When he died. This is a joke. When he died the undertaker said he never saw more women come in to look at my grandfather.

MODERATOR: A good looking man.

DORIS ALEXANDER: A ladies' man.

AURORA ALEXANDER: Just like Cecil. A ladies' man. My grandmother died very young. She died when she was 50-something years old. Of a stroke. And my grandfather lived in the house with all of us until he died in the 1940s.

MODERATOR: And did he have a retirement or did he work?

AURORA ALEXANDER: No. He worked for himself.

MODERATOR: Could you tell us a little bit about his work history? What work? You mentioned briefly that he worked with a gentleman from Barbados in real estate and that he worked for himself and ran a print shop.

AURORA ALEXANDER: No. He worked in a print shop.

MODERATOR: He worked in a print shop.

AURORA ALEXANDER: He and Mr. Jones did mostly real estate.

MODERATOR: And what kind of work did he do in real estate? Did he sell real estate?

AURORA ALEXANDER: He sold houses.

MODERATOR: Did he ever talk about his work or say anything about his days at work?

AURORA ALEXANDER: Not to us [laughter]. I know that he used to do Notary Public and he used to let us play with the stamp [laughter]. We used to play with the stamp all the time. The one you would lift up and punch down. So that is all I remember.

MODERATOR: He was a Notary. And what do you think is the most important influence that he had on you. In your opinion?

AURORA ALEXANDER: He was very strict. That's all I have.

MODERATOR: You remember him being very strict.

AURORA ALEXANDER: He was very strict.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Very strict and it was the tradition of the Barbadians to emphasize education. School was very important and another thing was to be very disciplined in your habits. Your home habits and your work habits.

MODERATOR: So that would mean keeping your room neat. Completing all of your homework. Being responsible in terms any chores that you were asked to do.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Absolutely. Absolutely.

AURORA ALEXANDER: Correct. That's right. We each had – every night -- we each had a duty to do. We had a list on the wall. So many nights it was your night to wash the dishes, your night to dry the dishes, your night to sweep the floor. And that was six, seven days a week. And also on Saturdays.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Saturdays.

AURORA ALEXANDER: On Saturdays we had to clean. Everyone, at a certain time you had to get your things ready. And then someone came and checked. We had five stories. You had to dust between the posts and you had to do...

MODERATOR: That was a large house to clean.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Yes.

AURORA ALEXANDER: And you had to do it. You had to do it by the little schedule on the wall. I liked to wash. I remember I liked to wash the dishes. But you didn't have the same duty every night. The night I had to wash, she may have to dry.

MODERATOR: So you changed chores.

AURORA ALEXANDER: Yes.

MODERATOR: Could you tell us about your other siblings. You have each other, sisters. And you have a brother. Could you tell us their names and when they were born?

AURORA ALEXANDER: You can tell her.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Cecil was the oldest. He was the one who stayed in Barbados until he was 12. Aurora was next. Then I came and then Sonny, which was Norman. And progressively we were all just two or three years apart. And other than school, we all attended school regularly. Of course Summer vacations. At that time it was the tradition that when Summer came you sort of relaxed, but you had a regular schedule as well as in the Winter time. You went to a Summer day school, usually affiliated with a church. So that we were in school getting an education for half of the day, then you were on your own for the rest of the day. You were allowed to play, but my mother was very strict. If you played outside, at a certain time you had to come in the house. And there was never any yelling or screaming or "come in". All she had to do was come on the step of the house and clap her hands, and that meant come in.



AURORA ALEXANDER: Everybody come in.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Everybody that we played with knew.

AURORA ALEXANDER: When our mother came out and clapped, Aurora and Doris were going home.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Everybody knew that meant the end of play.

MODERATOR: What did other children who were not from Barbados -- or did not have parents or grandparents from Barbados -- what did they think of you and how did they treat you in school and in the neighborhood?

AURORA ALEXANDER: [unintelligible]

DORIS ALEXANDER: Yes. We were one of the group and some were from the islands also. One of the West Indian islands. And some of American parentage. But we found that those of the American parentage had a little more freedom than those of the West Indians. But we were very much like the others.

MODERATOR: I would think, just as an aside, if I were a child I would be impressed with your self-discipline. You were probably very good students. At home do you remember family gatherings or table discussions about politics or current events that interested your grandparents or your parents? Do you remember anything like that when you were younger, a child, a teen?

DORIS ALEXANDER: My mother belonged to the Democratic Party and she was a very devoted member of the Democratic Party and she would attend meetings there. But there was never too much discussion on politics in the house. Religion was stressed more I'd say. We were very strict in our attendance at Sunday school and our prayers and prayer habits in the house.

MODERATOR: What church did you attend?

DORIS ALEXANDER: We were Episcopal. Episcopalians. That was the Church of England and most of the West Indians were Anglicans or that is comparable to the American Episcopal Church. So that we all belonged to the Episcopal Church. We walked almost a half-hour to get to our church every Sunday, but we didn't miss a Sunday. It was the belief that if you were sick, you went anyway. As long as you weren't...as long as you didn't have a fever. You never missed school. Go on to school, you'll feel better. We never used to stay home.

MODERATOR: Now in addition to going to school, did you have opportunities or were you encouraged to pursue other enrichments?

DORIS ALEXANDER: Oh yes.

MODERATOR: And what would they be? Were they similar or you had different interests?

AURORA ALEXANDER: We belonged to the Girl Scouts and the boys belonged to the Boy Scouts.

MODERATOR: Very nice.

AURORA ALEXANDER: You stayed in that organization until I guess -- you didn't become a leader -- but you stayed until you reached the age limit.

DORIS ALEXANDER: And then there were the piano lessons or the violin lessons we had to take whether you had the talent or not.

MODERATOR: Did you play both the piano and the violin?

ALEXANDER SISTERS: No, the boys played the violin.

AURORA ALEXANDER: The girls played the piano. You had to.

MODERATOR: And you had a piano in your home?

DORIS ALEXANDER: Yes, an upright piano. And then as the years went by I remember Aunt Vi bought...

AURORA ALEXANDER: A baby grand piano and up until we moved to New Jersey we had a baby grand. When we sold it they called it a parlor grand, not a baby grand. A parlor grand.

MODERATOR: How many years as a teen did you take piano lessons or music lessons?

DORIS ALEXANDER: Until we realized we didn't have the talent [laughter]. But my brother, who liked the piano, he had a gift. And he used to play without any music. He could just hear a tune, sit down and play. Cecil. He was the only one of the four who really pursued any of these instruments or things of that sort.

AURORA ALEXANDER: And the thing about it was that your parents taught you. We didn't go to a school or any of that. Your parents all played piano. So the parents gave us...this great Aunt Alice gave us lessons and my mother gave us lessons. And my great aunt used to, after school, you would have to practice after school -- after our homework. She used to say. She used to be downstairs cooking and she knew who was playing and who was next to practice their lessons and we had to practice every single day. On Saturdays you went and got your lesson. She

moved you up to a level higher. I played up to the part where you had to learn to use the pedal. That's when I stopped.

MODERATOR: Now, when you had a chance to play outdoors or engage in a physical activity, did you do anything in particular? Play softball, or...what did girls do in Brooklyn?

DORIS ALEXANDER: It was tennis for a while.

AURORA ALEXANDER: For us, tennis.

DORIS ALEXANDER: I was never much into sports.

AURORA ALEXANDER: But we had to start it.

MODERATOR: Try and work at it.

AURORA ALEXANDER: Try. Whether you liked it or not.

MODERATOR: And if you felt rebellious and did not want to practice piano or do your homework, what would happen? [Laughter]

AURORA ALEXANDER: No, you never felt rebellious

DORIS ALEXANDER: Rebellious. That was a word we never heard. No, you never rebelled [against] your parents.

AURORA ALEXANDER: No, no. You never rebelled.

MODERATOR: So your family never moved. You lived in the same house, grew up and lived in the same house. Let's talk a little bit about your education as you got older. You both graduated from high school. What high school did you graduate from?

DORIS ALEXANDER: Girls High School in Brooklyn.

MODERATOR: And did you have favorite subjects there? Did you consider yourself college tracked -- I guess they would say at the time? That you had intended to continue your education or go out to work after high school?

DORIS ALEXANDER: No. Education was...college was the only thing that was in our sights you know. So, after high school we went on to college.

MODERATOR: And what years did you graduate from high school?

AURORA ALEXANDER: 1936?

DORIS ALEXANDER: No, let's see. I came out of college in 1942, so 1938.

MODERATOR: 1938 you graduated from high school.

AURORA ALEXANDER: So it must have been 1937 [for me].

DORIS ALEXANDER: You were a year ahead of me.

MODERATOR: And your high school years. Could you talk about them? Did you enjoy high school? Did you have a favorite subject? Friends in high school?

DORIS ALEXANDER: Science was always my interest. Although I remember in grammar school – they used to call it grammar school in those days, elementary school – I won the history medal. I guess some sort of outstanding achievement. But I was always interested in science.

AURORA ALEXANDER: I was always interested in languages. I had five years of Latin and four years of French. And I was always going to, in my mind, to be a French teacher. But I [unintelligible] turned and I ended up doing stenography and typing. Court reporting. Court reporting, stenotype reporting, closed mic reporting – in the courts. I ended up being a secretary to a Court of Appeals judge.

DORIS ALEXANDER: I am sorry. I was going to say that Latin was routinely taught in high school in those days. You know, they said that was the foundation of all of the Romance Languages. Of course we also took the French and the German. Those were mine.

MODERATOR: And your high school class. Your teachers and in your high school, were young women encouraged to go to college? There couldn't have been as many as today who had as much opportunities in college. I think high school students -- young women -- were sort of directed towards nursing programs or secretarial training. And so, I'm wondering if you felt when you were graduating from high school that you were doing something that was a little unusual for young women in the 1930s.

DORIS ALEXANDER: No. I didn't. No, no, no. It was assumed that everybody after high school would go on to college. We went to an all-girls high school so there was, you know, no competition with the boys and all the women, all the young women, went on to college.

MODERATOR: And your brothers, where did they go to high school?

DORIS ALEXANDER: They went to Boys High.

AURORA ALEXANDER: It's called. It's called Boys High. It was all boys.

MODERATOR: And they went on to college as well?

DORIS ALEXANDER: No. They went into the service or into... One is a policeman, but they didn't go on to college. But the girls did. Interestingly.

MODERATOR: Let's talk about your college experiences. Where did you go to college and what did you study in college?

DORIS ALEXANDER: I went to Hunter College. At that time, you entered based on your results from your Regents. We had Regents in those days and you had to have a certain average to even apply for what they called City Colleges. And I was eligible and went to Hunter College in 1938 and graduated in 1942. I went in at 16 and came out at 20.

MODERATOR: And your field of study?

DORIS ALEXANDER: I majored in zoology, minored in botany. And I had the expectation of going along with the medical field. I went down to Washington; I thought I would see about the medical school there. At that time I wasn't fully convinced that that was going to be my chosen field. And I had enough education courses that I would be qualified to go to teaching if that was my alternate. But somehow I didn't particularly like going into the classroom situation so I ended up doing hospital work as a technologist. That's where I stayed.

MODERATOR: Did you visit each other? Hunter College and at your work? Did you see each other on the job?

DORIS ALEXANDER: No. Even though we are just a year apart, we had almost separate lives, you know and just very different personalities I guess.

MODERATOR: But you each knew what the other was doing? And you must have thought pretty highly of what the other was doing.

DORIS ALEXANDER: We just took it for granted.

MODERATOR: And at the time that you were at Hunter College you were living at home and went to the school for classes?

DORIS ALEXANDER: Yes. Yes. And the war came. It was 1942 and the war came and New Jersey at that time asked to have sign workers in their signal corps. And I said well this was a good chance to branch out. Jobs were plentiful at that time. And the pay was good. So I started out at, was it \$1,440? Big salary. So I came down here to Fort Monmouth. And I worked at the Signal Corps.

MODERATOR: Now was that? I'm sorry to interrupt. Was that salary weekly?

ALEXANDER SISTERS: A year!

DORIS ALEXANDER: \$1,440 a year. But that was big money in those days.

MODERATOR: Do you remember what your salary might have been at the time?

AURORA ALEXANDER: I started at \$1,440 at Washington, DC. And you thought that was a lot of money. And it was, because I used to send my mother home money and my mother used to take the money and bought war bonds. And to this day I still have the same war bonds. I started to cash some in and I had to pay so much interest. I decided I'll just leave the bonds right there.

MODERATOR: Can you tell me about your first work experiences as you remember them? Do you remember a job interview? Do you remember...does anything stand out in your mind of your early work experiences? Positives or negatives? Someone who encouraged you.

AURORA ALEXANDER: I remember mine. I was going to Hunter and then I stopped and then my aunt -- great aunt, one of them that my grandfather, one of the daughters -- she worked in the post office. And she saw in the papers that they were hiring secretaries in Washington. So she told me about it. And I like to take any examination I see, so I took the examination in January. Passed it in February and in March I was in Washington, D.C. I went to Washington and my grandfather knew [that] Mr. King's daughter was a doctor in Washington. So my mother felt at ease letting me stay with them in Washington. And I went to work and how they selected where you were going to work -- I went down to the federal office -- all I know it was on F Street. And we went all around the table and you picked up a piece of paper and it told you where you were going to work. Because it was the war and a lot of people were applying. I went to the Department of Labor, as a secretary. And they took me. I took the paper and I went to the Department of Labor and I was the first black secretary. I was on the fourth floor, I don't

remember. But that day when I first went there I couldn't believe it. People were riding up and down the elevator to see who this black secretary was coming to the Department of Labor. In those days they had elevator operators and the women told me that they were riding people up and down, up and down because they hired the first black secretary to work in the Department of Labor. I mean in that section. I stayed there for five years. Then I came back to New York. My mother kept saying come home, come home, come home.

MODERATOR: What about your early work experiences? That is a wonderful story.

AURORA ALEXANDER: I'll tell you another story. And then they built in Washington, when the war first started. That was in '42. In '43 they built a government building for all female and male government workers and black government workers got their own building. They put them in a building all by themselves. The white women had a building all for themselves. Which was a beautiful building. Ours was nice, new and right off the street. It had a circular driveway and everything. And the black men – I stayed in Lucy Diggslow (sp) Hall and the men stayed in Carver Hall. And the property was owned by Howard University so I don't know if it is still there and whether Howard University put their students...use that building now. But I stayed there in room 246. The first one in the room 246. I stayed there for four years in that building. A government building, Diggslow Hall. But it was nice because we had a cafeteria. We had a beauty shop. We had a room where people could entertain. We used to go down and see the entertainment. Separate but equal.

MODERATOR: From your family's heritage in Barbados, was that system strange? Separate but equal.

AURORA ALEXANDER: No, because I met that in other places.

MODERATOR: Did you experience that in your workplace?

DORIS ALEXANDER: Well I came from Brooklyn and I went to Fort Monmouth. And this was in an area of contract writing that really wasn't what I thought I would be doing. And it also had to do with testing of equipment being used in the Signal Corps equipment. So there were transistors and capacitors that would fit in these very complicated systems where they could pick up different signals from a distance. And we were testing them to make sure they met

certain qualifications. So I did that; however, I was never really happy in that. I really wanted to do medical type of work. Eventually I was transferred to a medical unit as a civilian. But while I was assigned to Fort Monmouth I experienced some discrimination. I didn't know whether you wanted to hear this, but I was told to go ahead and say it anyway. I had an attack of appendicitis, unfortunately, and I was sent to a Long Branch hospital. At that time the discrimination was rampant and they had the policy that black – they used to call them Negro at that time – patients could not be in the same room as a white patient. So they cleared out one large room so I had the room all to myself. But I was in that room and I was all by myself. So, I received good treatment and I survived. I was operated on and I convalesced, but I never forgot that experience. So that was one of my more unfortunate experiences in Long Branch. And I don't know whether that was all over New Jersey. But I must say that after that period I was moved around because after Fort Monmouth I went to Camp Evans, Bradley Beach, Trenton, Fort Dix. By then the war was over and they dismissed most of their civilian employees. That is when I went back to Brooklyn and really pursued my medical technology experiences and my career. That's where I ended up in the pathology lab where I worked for the Veterans Administration until I retired. But that was my experience. And that was in the 40s. So then when I relocated back down here in the 90s, I thought things might have changed. I should have known better. Because over the years – over a 50-year interim – I find that things haven't changed very much down here. I find that there's still a lot of discrimination unfortunately. People are of the same persuasion. That will hopefully come in time.

MODERATOR: Can I ask, did you take opportunities for additional education through your careers? Even in your workplaces. If you worked for the federal government, there might have been opportunities for education beyond your bachelor's degrees.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Well after I retired, I went back to school and I wasn't interested so much in getting degrees. I wanted to broaden my exposure to the arts and self-improvement, so I went to the New School in Manhattan on 14th Street. And I was there for five years. And I just took courses without any credit. I could have gotten credit, but I did opt to not get any credit. Where



I exposed myself to courses in the arts: play-going, appreciation of great paintings, museum trips, things of that sort. And I really enjoyed those five years much more so than any of my previous education courses.

AURORA ALEXANDER: In Washington we started working and I decided that I must do something education-wise and I went to Howard University. First I joined the choir. Then I took a course in mathematics for engineering students. And I passed it and got a certificate for engineering. Math for engineering students. Then when I left Washington I came to New York and I learned to do closed microphone reporting. You use a mic and you can take the testimony and when the judge says read that back you don't have to read it back. You just flip open. It comes on a record and its...the judge can hear it. I learned that and I passed with a 90-something percent grade. I also took court hearings. They called it Q&A. Q&A hearings. And also I ended up working for a judge in the Court of Appeals in New York City. [Unintelligible] Square. And I also went to the New School and I learned calligraphy.

DORIS ALEXANDER: I have to let you know, in addition to all of our school going and education and work, we always went on vacations. We did quite a bit of traveling. And it was during our school years, if it wasn't a camp every summer, we went on local vacations in and around upstate New York and places in the United States. And then we branched out. As you worked, you saved your money and then you went on trips abroad. So that we have traveled and seen just about every part of the United States, foreign countries, Europe, Russia, China, Israel.

AURORA ALEXANDER: Hong Kong. All of the West Indian islands.

MODERATOR: You have visited Barbados?

DORIS ALEXANDER: Most of the islands

AURORA ALEXANDER: Many times. I know Barbados just as good as I know Brooklyn. I can travel on the bus and everything.

MODERATOR: And you have family there that you keep in touch with.

DORIS ALEXANDER: They have all died out now, but for a time we were staying with them. And after a time you say well you'd like to be a little more independent so you'd stay at a hotel and you'd visit them. You know? But we always traveled.

AURORA ALEXANDER: Every year. Every year until I moved down here we traveled to another country. Spain. You name the country, we have been there.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Most of the European countries. Alaska. Africa. That was the best trip of all.

AURORA ALEXANDER: Four times to Africa. We went to Africa four times.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Israel.

MODERATOR: And why was that the best trip to you?

DORIS ALEXANDER: Africa? Because of the safari. But because of the strangeness of the countryside. Everything is so wide and spread out. You know? And no limitations at all as far as the eye could see.

MODERATOR: Very different from Brooklyn.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Oh yes, and you know the buildings and the experiences of living outdoors. We experienced the safari and living on the water's edge where you could hear the hippopotamus at night. And seeing many of the people who lived there govern themselves, do everything by themselves. You got on the plane and you saw an African pilot fly the plane from Kennedy to wherever you were going. It was very heartwarming.

MODERATOR: Can I ask you, since both of you worked for the federal government for most of your careers, could you maybe elaborate on why you were attracted to public service work? And what it was like to...so your brother was a policeman, right? So what drew you to public service? Was there anything that drew you to public service? Was it just available at the time?

AURORA ALEXANDER: It was just available at the time.

DORIS ALEXANDER: And security. Aunt Vi worked for the post office.

AURORA ALEXANDER: Yes. My, my aunt.

DORIS ALEXANDER: I think she was more the influence. You know. It was stability, it was permanent, it was a good retirement. They paid well and you were assured that if you put in your years and you worked well, then you were financially set when you left that. So I think security was more the thing that attracted you to government service. It was reliable.

AURORA ALEXANDER: My Aunt Vi. Aunt Vi and Uncle Byron, they traveled quite a bit too. And they went to the coronation do you remember which Queen? The first Queen [unintelligible]. And we used to get up early every morning to hear the news from England. And we had another cousin in the West Indies and she was real British. Every time they played *God Save the Queen* we had to stand up. Everyone in the house had to stand up. If we sat down she was going to box our ears. Box your ears means they would twist your ears and every time they played *God Save the Queen* or *King*, we had to stand up.

MODERATOR: That's a great story.

DORIS ALEXANDER: And Uncle Harry. He was a merchant seaman. So, he was used to traveling all over the world. So he would come back and tell us these stories you know? He went to England. He went to Europe. So the travel was always in the back of our minds. It would never... You always wanted to see what was over there. And he bought a house in Barbados after he came to America. He always called [it] home. They always referred to Barbados as home. Although though they knew they may never go back, they always talked about home. So that many times when we started traveling he would say, "You know you must go sit on the veranda. You are here, you should be in Barbados sitting on the veranda." So we always had travel on our minds.

MODERATOR: In your retirement years -- in the years you've been retired -- in addition to travel and enrichment, are there other pursuits that you've taken up?

DORIS ALEXANDER: Theater for me. I love the theater.

MODERATOR: Any community service?

ALEXANDER SISTERS: Yes. Oh yes.

DORIS ALEXANDER: I volunteer at Monmouth Hospital [Monmouth Medical Center] right in Long Branch. I have been there 15 years. We came down in August in '94. By October I was volunteering at the hospital. And this year I would say with humility over pride I was awarded the achievement of being the volunteer of the year at Monmouth. And presented with a beautiful trophy. And this was, they call it the Clara Field Award. A volunteer who was there, who put in the equivalent of 20 years of a full-time employee. So in her honor it's called the Clara Field Award. So yes, always community service and organizations involved with giving back.

MODERATOR: And you were involved in volunteering in 9/11? Can you tell us a little about that experience?

AURORA ALEXANDER: Well at that time my niece was very sick and that's why we were over in Brooklyn. And when the towers fell my nephew came in and said turn on the radio. So I turned on the radio. Doris was in New York attending to my niece so I went over there. In the lobby of the building there was a sign they needed help. Needed people to assist them at the Red Cross, which is across the street by the Brooklyn Bridge. The Brooklyn Bridge, right across that ramp is the Red Cross headquarters and they needed people. So the week – we took turns going up there to stay with my niece – so I said I'm going to volunteer. So I went across the street and they said what can you do, so I did data entry. And I did that for 9/11 until 2/02. I worked a whole week. You worked from 9 to 5 and I really enjoyed the work, and the people and the environment. Very nice. The only thing [was] you could keep smelling the smoke from the building all the time. Then at the end – I have the badge – and then the Red Cross gave you a plaque.

DORIS ALEXANDER: I happened to be in Brooklyn at the time of 9/11 and I remember the day. I was all ready to go into New York by subway and I received a telephone call from a friend and he said you know, I don't think you're going to be able to get into New York City. And I said why? He said because there has been a bombing at the World Trade Center. I said, I just thought a bombing like the previous time that they bombed I just thought a hole in the building. The subways would not be stopped. He said put on the television. I put the television on and then I saw. I said oh dear. I said maybe I better not even try, because I am very adventuresome. So I said maybe I can find a way I can get into the city. There was no way to get into the city, so I could see – I could smell the smoke. He said look out the window. So I looked out the window and I could see the smoke billowing. And after a time you could smell the smoke. Before the end – about 12:00 I started to see a parade of people coming, walking over the Brooklyn Bridge. And there was no end to it, just one after another. Some with their shoes in their hands, you know, walking weary and sort of bewildered and they were just walking, walking. After a time I

was in her apartment, which is a co-op at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge and I went outside to watch them more closely. And I watched from about 2:00 until about 7:00 that day. It was a steady stream. Then it sort of petered out. And that evening, church bells rang. The churches were open and I went over to do the church and I sat there for about an hour.

AURORA ALEXANDER: But you could smell the smoke for weeks after.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Weeks afterwards.

AURORA ALEXANDER: We were working in the Red Cross building and someone might open up the window and you could smell the smoke. We would say, close the window.

MODERATOR: I'd like to ask you too and look at some of your certificates. When you were federal workers, were you members of the labor union? Were you members of the labor union?

ALEXANDER SISTERS: No. No.

MODERATOR: You were professional and not part of the labor.

DORIS ALEXANDER: I don't believe federal employees could join unions at that time.

MODERATOR: Since you brought some materials with you, including photographs and documents, I just thought we could take a few minutes so you could share what you brought with us. So we have it on our video tape too.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Yes, well I was always very much on the ground floor of starting organizations and I was instrumental in being one of the founding members of one of our organizations connected with the National Association of University Women. And I was the first President for a four-year term and subsequently have been a member of the organization for a number of years. This is a local branch, the Brooklyn branch of the National Association of University Women of which it is a national organization – sorry. They are involved with giving scholarships to young women who are interested in pursuing their education. And we have various fundraising affairs during the year where we can raise money for this one purpose.

MODERATOR: Were you a scholarship student in college? Did you receive?

DORIS ALEXANDER: No. No. No, no, no. Fortunately, Hunter College was what – at that time – what they called a “free” institution. You paid for certain things: your books and certain other fees. But tuition, there wasn’t a tuition. And then I was a member of a black organization -- The Wisterians – which is still in existence. This was made up of graduates of Hunter College and we have been involved in giving back to Hunter College in various capacities. Establishing different funds in the name of the Wisterians. And it is called the Wisterians because that is the flower of Hunter College. A lavender flower which is very similar to the Lilac. Then of course block associations all along the way. Whichever block we lived on we were involved with the block association. Church of course was always a major part of my life.

MODERATOR: Did either of you do public speaking at these groups -- I’m sure or conduct meetings for these organizations that you were a part of.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Yes, well as President of one of these organizations you know you do public speaking. Then you have your affairs where you are either the Chairman or Mistress of Ceremonies or that sort. But as for going out and making public speeches, no.

MODERATOR: Do you have another document here?

DORIS ALEXANDER: No. This is the history of the family. This is the family history. But after a time with these organizations, you know, they honor you and you receive plaques. Of which I've received from the organizations plus my church. The Brooklyn church is where I really was very active. I found that when we came to Long Branch unfortunately it wasn't the same. It was the Episcopal Church but the church that we had been very active in and belonged to the Episcopal Church, but we still had our separate churches. Aurora went to a different church, and I went to a different church. They were both Episcopal and I was involved with so many organizations that when I left I received a beautiful plaque. And I still maintain my membership back there. But I go back to New York. It's usually to the theater but I go back to the Brooklyn church. And another organization that I was instrumental in founding – a senior group – the Golden Agers.

MODERATOR: And what do you have in your hand?

AURORA ALEXANDER: Oh this is when I was on one of my trips to China. I went to the Great Wall and they gave me a certificate saying that I was at the Wall.

MODERATOR: And what year was this?

AURORA ALEXANDER: 1988. 8-8-88.

MODERATOR: Very international.

AURORA ALEXANDER: And I also went to Hong Kong that same year too.

MODERATOR: Were these group trips or did you travel on your own?



AURORA ALEXANDER: That was on our own.

MODERATOR: You traveled on your own. You made all the arrangements on your own.

AURORA ALEXANDER: Yes.

MODERATOR: Very impressive.

AURORA ALEXANDER: And we had a big house in Brooklyn so we didn't all travel together. Someone had to stay behind and mind the house. Baby – I used to say house- sit. But every year we went. And I enjoyed my trip to Egypt. Egypt, we stayed I Egypt, two years – two weeks. And one was a cruise, [as] they say "Up the Nile". That was the most enjoyable trip I have ever spent.

MODERATOR: And why was that?

AURORA ALEXANDER: Well the ship, the ship didn't rock all the time. And the food. I don't know why, every trip I go on I get travelers' diarrhea or whatever it is. Nothing when I went to Egypt. My body must know. And I really enjoyed that trip to Egypt. And all the trips I enjoyed very well. And when I volunteered, I volunteered at Monmouth Medical for a while. Then I went to the, what is the other one? I left the paper in there.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Is it Children's Services?

AURORA ALEXANDER: Children's Services. They wrote a little article about me in there but its inside. I don't have it here. I enjoyed my work there. I did data entry there for a while. And we also belong to the Senior Center in Long Branch. For seniors. I participate in some of their activities. Not too many.

MODERATOR: Now is there anything that either of you haven't done yet that you would like to do?

DORIS ALEXANDER: I always regretted not going to Alaska. That was one of my trips that I did not take. I found that the older you get, you don't have the same motivation to travel. You feel that you don't feel as though you could keep up the pace. Travel can be exhausting. And if you want to see as much as you can in that limited space of time that are in any foreign country, you really have to get up and get out every day. And there is a lot of walking involved. As you get older you find your feet don't want to do what you want them to do mentally so that you slow down. And I don't think that I would enjoy it as much.

MODERATOR: And how about you? Is there anything that you haven't done that you would like to do?

AURORA ALEXANDER: Not that I can think of at the moment. I've done almost everything that I wanted to do.

MODERATOR: And finally I wanted to ask you, are there are any "things" -- and I guess they don't have to be material things -- that are heirlooms from Barbados, from your grandfather, from your family? And as I said, it doesn't have to be a photo or a thing, it might be a tradition, a memory that's an heirloom to from your grandfather, from your family, Barbados.

DORIS ALEXANDER: Other than the work ethic. I think that has been passed down and that's part of our built-in DNA. You really feel that the day is well spent if you worked and if you have done something productive during that day. And also to help somebody along the way as you go, but to keep busy and to keep active and to keep your mind and your body active.

MODERATOR: And you agree?

AURORA ALEXANDER: Yeah, I agree.