

Interview with Reverend Willie James
Conducted April 7, 2005

Interviewer: garbled...after four years...I just want to know do you know about the reputation that Pennypacker gets?

James: Yes, I do, unfortunately.

Interviewer: Why do you think its like that and they named the school after you.

James: I think that is two questions

Interviewer: One question at a time.

James: The first question is why do I think its that way? First of all, Pennypacker is not any different than any school in your large metropolitan area where you have a large African American population. And this is based upon some studies that was done by the National office of the NAACP. You have this type of situation. The first is test scores. There is some evidence that the test scores that is given to our students is somehow bias. It is based upon the same test scores that are given to students in communities where you have large populations of unminorities. (Interviewer: You don't think it's the teachers?) One of the reasons is because of the type of conditions under which the students are living in metropolitan areas and suburbs is somewhat different. That's a part of the answer. The other answer is that there is a tremendous lack of parental involvement in the education of the children of our communities. I've been to many PTA meetings in Burlington County and the Willingboro district and you find very few parents involved. So basically that is the reason and there are many other reasons too.

Interviewer: My name is (garbled) Burroughs and I've lived in Willingboro for seventeen years and how long have you lived in Willingboro?

James: Well, I moved into Willingboro in 1960, about October 1960.

Interviewer: My name is (garbled) and I have only lived in Willingboro for about a month a little over a month (garbled)...

James: Well, I have been involved in the Civil Rights movement since about 1943 and I was initially an officer in the Criminal Investigation Division of the United States (garbled) when I came to (garbled) Ft Dix, NJ and my family and I for a short period of time we lived in Burlington and I found that segregation and discrimination were widespread. Not only in Burlington County but throughout the State of NJ. Some of the schools in Burlington City for example were segregated. You did not go to the...Blacks did not go to the state and elementary school until they reached the eight grade. When they reached the eighth grades that's when they went to schools that were integrated.

Interviewer: How was Willingboro the first year you moved in?

James: I beg your pardon.

Interviewer: How was Willingboro the first year you moved in? 1960, what do you remember?

James: I beg your pardon?

Interviewer: How was Willingboro the first year you moved in?

James: Well, prior to my moving to Willingboro, my family and I had been trying to find a home to move in. My family and I had been trying to find a home to stay in throughout the area of Burlington County and we had been giving the runaround by builders and it wasn't until I, uh, ... Levitt and his sons started building in Willingboro that I went to his office and applied for homes and he told me at that time, he would not be selling homes to Blacks. I wasn't aware that there was a State law that prohibit discrimination in public housing... in places of public accommodation. And a friend of mine who worked in the State Division of Civil Rights [tape is blank] Levitt would stall throughout the Judicial system. So I filed suit against him in 1958 and it took two years to get through the courts because he had 60 days to appeal at each level. So after two years it went to the State Superior Court and they ruled against him. He appealed to the Supreme Court, he knew he was going to lose so he placed an article in the paper saying he would sell homes to Blacks. I was told to go and apply but he told me he couldn't sell me a house because I was in litigation with him. In other words, the Supreme Court had not made a decision. The Supreme Court only took about two months before they decided...

Interviewer: The Supreme Court of New Jersey or the United States?

James: No, the Supreme court of the United States. They decided they would not hear the case thus upholding the NJ laws. That's when Willingboro was integrated

Unknown female: They remanded it back to the State Superior Court?

James: Yes

Interviewer: Where were you living at before you moved to Willingboro, NJ?

James: I was living on the post at Fort Dix, NJ.

Interviewer: You were in the military at that time and your family was living with you.

James: Yes

Interviewer: When you finally moved in, when you finally bought the house, how much was the house that you bought?

James: At that time I believe the colonial homes were selling for about \$15,000. Now they had been cheaper than that, but about every year the homes would go up some and I could see that Levitt was stalling and by the time...if I won the case the homes would have significantly increased so we got an injunction against him to sell me a home at the original price of the home. So basically the home was at \$15,000.

Interviewer: Were there other Black people applying for homes with you? Or were you the only family?

James: Well, I really don't know, I know that when he put an article in the paper saying he would sell homes to Blacks. There were some Blacks who applied and he sold homes to Blacks. But what he did, uh he set an area aside for Blacks to move into. As the white people applied he would ask them to if they had any objection to living next door to African Americans and if they said no, he would sell them a home. The Attorney General told me that when I did apply for a home to be aware of the fact he was trying to set aside Blacks in one particular area. And so when we applied eventually, we were aware of that. So when they directed us to that particular area and we decided not to move to that area. We went to an area where there were few people living and there were no Blacks living in that area. The idea was to integrate the entire community.

Interviewer: What part of town was this, at that time?

James: I moved into...the home I moved into was located on 32 Marchmont in Willingboro.

Female audience member: Which park was this?

James & Interviewer: Millbrook Park.

Male audience member: What was the first park?

James: The first park was probably Somerset in that particular area.

Male audience member: What was the sports teams like, football?

James: Sports team?

Male audience member: garbled

James: At that time the high school was located across from where the original library was, that building across the street. That used to be the administration building for the school. That was the high school.

Male audience member: The Levitt building, the middle school?

James: That was the high school and my son and two young other boys, they were the first to go to that school. Eventually, they built Kennedy School and my two daughters were the first African Americans students in that school.

Interviewer: What do you think about the school system today?

James: Well, uh, its kind of hard for me to answer that question for one reason. In 1974, I was working for International Telephone and Telegraph corporation and they transferred me to Providence, Rhode Island in 1974. Before I left here, er, first of all when there were only two, three, four or five African American students in the schools there were never any problems. As the years passed and there were more and more African Americans moving into the community, they first started moving into Somerset and that area. That's when they began to have problems. They had a police chief, I think his name was. I don't remember his name, but he organized the Police Department. Whenever there was an incident between a lot of students, Black and white. They would break it up by using dogs to disperse the African American students. And I have newspaper articles that cover everything I am talking about now. Because what I did, is, by that time I had become president...garbled...of the Burlington County [garbled] and we organized and met with him and challenged him to stop using dogs on any children. And to also employ African American policemen.

Interviewer: Are you saying the police were racists?

James: Yes.

Female audience member: What year was this? When your children first went to school here. You said your boy...

James: 1960

Female audience member: and you said your girls...

James: They went to elementary school

Female audience member: In the 60's. I see, did you have other family members living in the area. Or you came here because of the military.

James: My wife's family lives in Burlington, in fact my wife went to the elementary school that's located on, she went to school in Burlington. It wasn't until she was an eighth grader that she went to the first white school. So actually, the schools, Willingboro, this area was, er, the entire state was that way. Because it got so bad that we challenged the Department of Education of the State to look into the school system in Burlington County. We met someplace in Mt Holly. And she told me she would get back to me, it was two or three of us that met with them. She called me later on and told me you don't realize how bad it is, its that way throughout the State. That's when they began

to introduce laws that would eliminate discrimination in the school system. There were no African American teachers that were beyond...garbled...administrators, they were all elementary schools, the African American schools. And they began to place them in higher administrative positions in the schools.

Female audience member: Can you tell us if black people had special places to go to Church and work?

James: Well, er, when I first came here, I used to be a Methodist. I was born and raised in the Methodist, Baptist Church and the only church I remember going to was Tabernacle Baptist Church. At that time the church was so small, I think the capacity was about a hundred people. If you are familiar with Tabernacle Baptist Church in Burlington. It is one of the largest churches in the area. It has grown to the extent where there are two or three thousand members. But there were not that many African American churches in existence at that time it was very small.

Male audience member: Were gangs an issue, a big issue at that time?

James: Yes, it was in Burlington City. There was a lot of fighting in Burlington City [male audience member: what about in Willingboro?] on York and Federal Streets. I remember that there were several murders on that street. There was a place called Fitzgeralds, a restaurant, if its still there, on that corner there were quite a few incidents of that type.

Male audience member: What about in Willingboro?

James: There were never any incidents of that type. Never any murders, but, there were gangs organizing in Willingboro, about, maybe three or four, or five years after I got here. African Americans were moving into Willingboro and the schools were integrated. That's when all hell broke loose and there were fights and incidents of all kinds between the students.

Interviewer: Were there a lot of riots?

James: Yes, some riots. What happened was that it got so bad that I talked the Township into organizing a Human Relations Committee. Because what was happening was that they were arresting the Black students but not arresting the white students. Yes.

Male audience member: Do you know why some...garbled...Burlington will fight Willingboro? They still fight to this day. Willingboro can't have a party without Burlington coming over and crashing and Burlington can't have a party without Willingboro going over there.

James: You mean now?

Male audience member: Yeah, like today. It's still like that today.

James: Nah, I wasn't aware of that. I don't think its that way now.

Female audience member: Willingboro doesn't really get along with them.

James: You mean there's riots?

Male audience member: No, not riots.

James: I think that unless you have some kind of racial diversity, uh, about three or four years ago there were a lot of incidents. At one time, Burlington Township schools were all white. But when they started building the new homes in that area, you didn't have any African Americans moving in. But, as African Americans began moving in, that's when there was racism in the schools. I met with the Superintendent of Schools, Dr Frisk, and gave him some guidelines on what they should do to avoid violations of the Civil Rights Act in education. And it wasn't until he and I were together that the first thing he did was organize the professional group. And a diversity training program for all of the teachers and administrative staff because there was no question that there was racism on the part of the white teachers. [Garbled] There was a black female student who was number one in her class when she was a junior. An Indian who was number two and a white boy who was number three. His teacher made a remark to the white boy that you should be ashamed of yourself to let the monkees get ahead of you in studies and she used some degrogrey name to refer to the Indian. When the teachers brought that to my attention, I brought it to Dr Frisk attention and that's when he began to...we worked together for two years before we were able to get some things done in that school. Yes?

FAM: Did they have like school buses for the black kids and the white kids?

James: School what?

FAM: Bus?

James: Bus, yes. In fact, in Burlington, when my wife went to school, she lived on a section of Burlington there's a tower there on a section of Fifth Street she had to walk across the highway, Route 130, to get to her school. White kids that lived in the area were bused. Yes?

FAM: How long did it take for the black kids to take the bus to go to school?

James: You mean years after that?

FAM: Yeah.

James: (Garbled) The superintendent of schools changed things.

FAM: Was the training for the teachers done in school?

James: In the schools.

FAM: Have you been living in the same house?

James: I moved to... I was transferred to Atlanta in 1974, I lived there until... 1960 until 1974. When I came back I moved to Edgewater Park. That house I lived in there had been several articles in the paper about that house, I guess because of my, er, involvement with the court system had brought about intergration the schools systems in Willingboro and also in New Jersey. But I heard from the Philadelphia Inquirer, Courier Post called me just about every February to go and take a picture of me standing in front of the house. Now, it's a little embrassing to me because there are people living there now who I did not know. And the first time this happened, the lady came out to find out what was going on (MAM: Who are you? James: Yeah) and so er, it was pointed out to her that her home was considered a historical place. The last time this happened was only four or five months ago.

FAM: What year did you move back to Willingboro?

James: I never moved back to Willingboro, I moved to Edgewater Park.

MAM: You live in Edgewater Park now?

James: I live in Edgewater Park now.

James: You asked me a question. You asked two questions. One of the questions you asked me was about the schools. Why was the school named after me.

MAM: Why did they name a school after you?

James: When I was involved with Levittown, there was every newspaper, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Courier Post, the Burlington County Times. This was covered by all these papers, also the media. You must remember... and I think their reasons were this Levitt had built homes in Levittown Pennsylvania and he never did sell homes to blacks. He built homes in Levittown Maryland and he never did sell homes to blacks. He built homes in Levittown New York and he never did sell homes to blacks. It wasn't until this suit was filed against him, now I don't know if the other states had laws that prohibit discrimination in housing or not, but if they did, the laws were not being enforced. And so that's why it was such a major (garbled) the other one is because at that time they were writing the Civil Rights Bill and I think, I don't know who the President was at that time, but they were interested in this particular case so that they could write a housing clause in the Civil Rights Bill

MAM: Johnson, President Johnson.

James: I believe so. So that's why there was such widespread coverage of this whole situation.

MAM: What do you think about the (garbled)

James: In what respect.

MAM: Do you think the government is doing a better job now than they did before?

James: Oh yes. It wasn't until the Civil Rights Bill was passed that the government paid attention to discrimination anywhere. It was not illegal to discriminate.

MAM: Did you ever meet Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr?

James: I never did meet him, I was involved in the first March on Washington. I was there when he made that speech, "I had a dream". Martin Luther King didn't organize the march. It was organized by Minister Keith and another person by the name of Baynard Rustin and I don't remember what organization he was head of at the time. But Martin Luther King, I was there, had been there almost all day. In the afternoon, it then got boring. It wasn't until Martin Luther King got up to make that speech, I remember that there were people sitting on the banks of the river, they were tired and exhausted, and as he got up to start speaking everybody stood up and started trying to move forward to see who he was. It was one of the most moving things I can remember.