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Between the Wars

A House on Church Lane

John “Archie” Childs

John “Archie” Childs (aged 79) was interviewed by Louise Strawbridge on October 21, 1991.

I was born May 4, 1912 in Germantown. My mother’s name was Maude S. Samuels and my father’s name was Julian H. Childs. My parents were both born in Bowling Green, Virginia. My mother was a domestic until she married. My father was a lumber counter. They eloped to Germantown to get married. They knew someone here, which is why they chose Germantown.

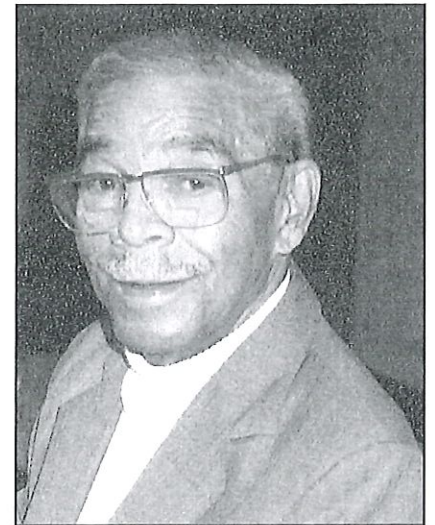
I was the oldest child. I had a younger sister, Anna, who is deceased, a brother Julian H. Childs—he’s a doctor in Los Angeles. My brother Charles E. Childs was the youngest boy. He passed about six or seven years ago.

My birth certificate says I was born at 199 W. Price Street. We moved from there to 135 W. Price—that’s the first place I remember. It was a typical two-story row home. W. Price Street was a Black pocket. It was all Black except for white businesses—there was March’s Bakery and a dairy where they processed milk. Then on the corner of Wayne and Price there was a bar.

I think I was about nine or ten when we moved to 218 W. Duval Street (still renting). After a couple of years on Duval we bought a house on McCallum Street. We were surrounded there by my mother’s sisters. Aunt Alice lived at 5908. Aunt Laura was at 5918, Aunt Annie at 5920, and Aunt Julia lived at 5938. We lived at 5940. My mother’s sisters all moved here after our family seemed to be making it financially. They all came from Bowling Green to Germantown and they were all domestic helpers. Some cooked or were upstairs or downstairs maids.

When we first moved to McCallum we were the second Black family there. So I had to cultivate a relationship with the Irish people there. Most of them were policemen’s families. I played with them but when we went to the movies we had to be separated. In the Colonial and the Orpheum they had balconies and we separated that way. You had to accept it if you wanted to see the movies. On Saturday they had the serials—Houdini and the Iron Man and Tom Mix. It cost 5 cents. I only remember questioning it once when I was in high school at the Stanley Theater at 19th and Market.

Behind the bank on the northwest corner of Germantown Avenue and School House Lane, where the vacant lot is was the Germantown Theater and they only had one floor. They had a big silver bar and they started



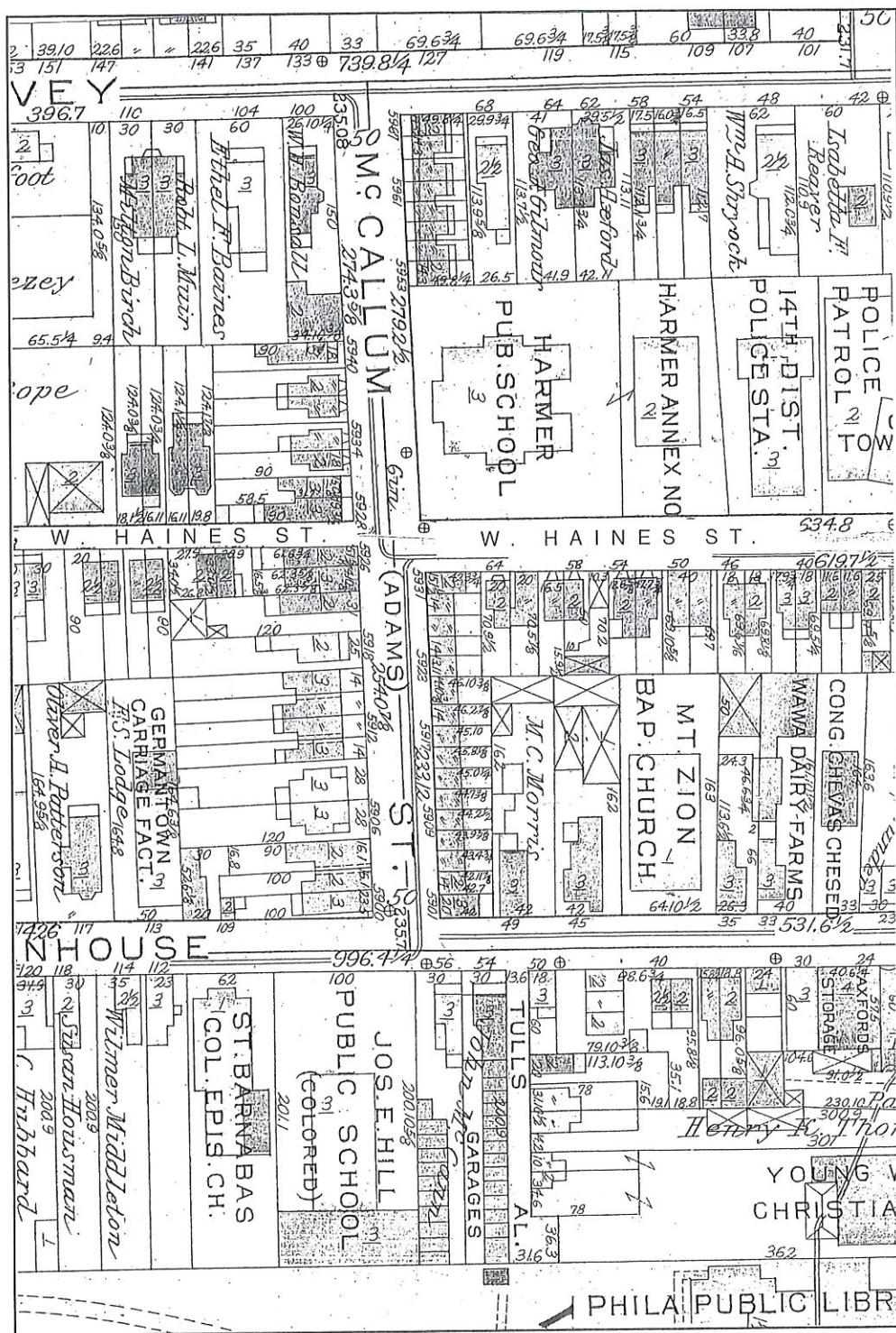
Archie Childs at the Hill School reunion, June 1992. Photograph by Louise Strawbridge. GHS archives.



Gregory March's bakery was at 166-68-70 W. Price Street. It occupied the whole northeast corner of W. Price and Knox Streets. GHS archives.



Houses on the 5900 block of McCallum Street. Photo by Judith Callard August 2006.



Archie Childs's parents and four aunts bought houses on the 5900 block of McCallum Street. Close by were the Hill School and St. Barnabas church. 1923 Ward Atlas. GHS archives.

at the last row and as Blacks came in they moved the bar down. That's where my white friends and I parted business.

Q. Did you visit in the neighbors' houses?

AC. Just one family—the Grivens family. They had about 4 or 5 boys. We played stickball, we roller skat-

ed up and down Haines Street and McCallum. A lot of times we used to come over in the park and play hardball.

I went to the Hill School. The teachers were very, very strict. If you didn't get your lessons they gave you a note to carry home to your parents. There was no provision made to promote you if you didn't pass your subjects. You just repeated and repeated and repeated until you got old enough to quit. Miss Roland was the principal and teachers were Miss Dumpson, Miss Morris, Miss White, Mr. Scott, and Mr. Griffin.¹

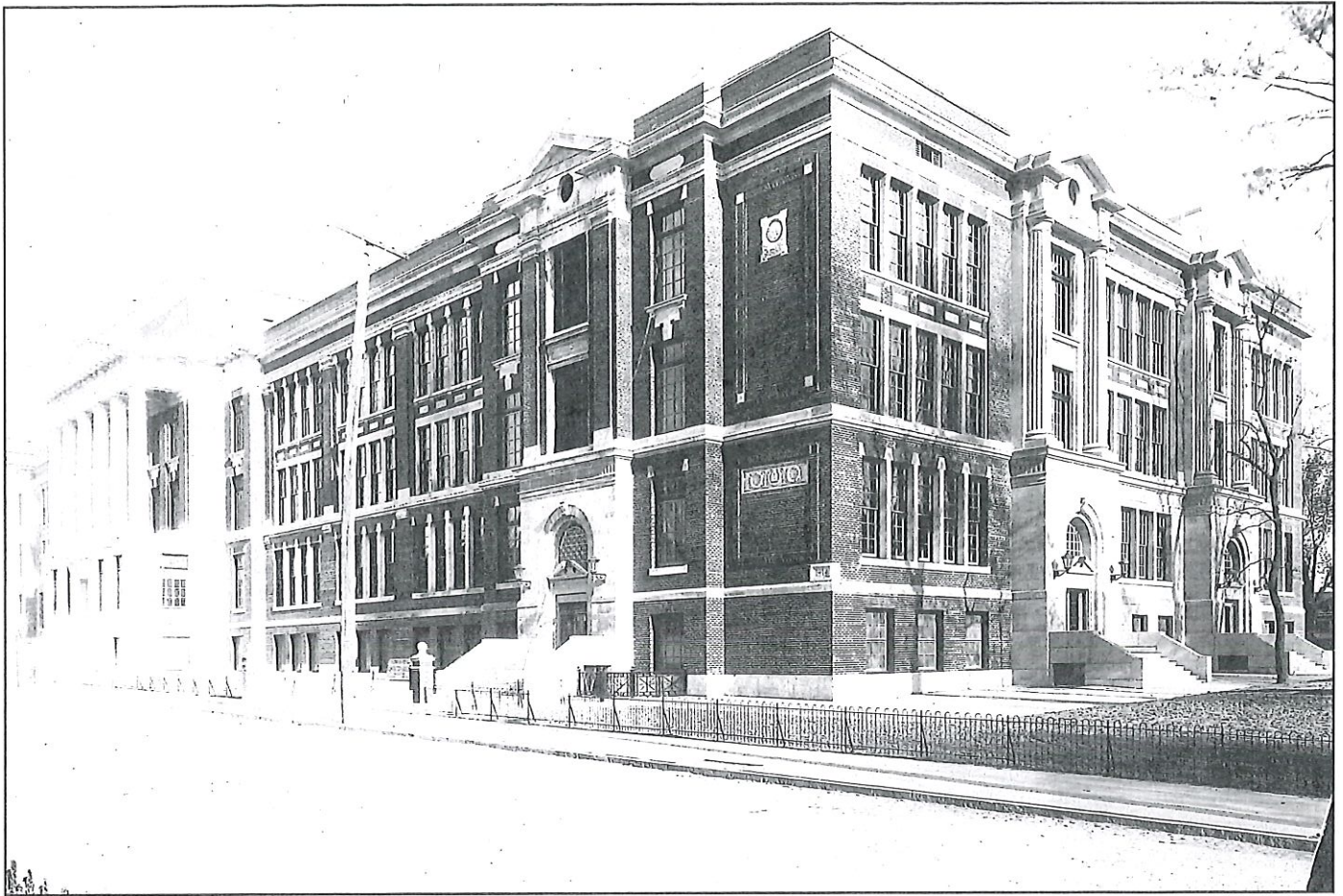
After that I went to Roosevelt Junior High around 1920. Roosevelt was integrated from the beginning but I was used to dealing with Whites. My Irish friends went to Catholic schools.

I remember there was a little confectionary store at Herman and Tulpehocken. We used to steal a box of donuts and eat them all before we got to school.

At Germantown High the counselors mostly wanted the Black students to take commercial and trade courses. Very few counselors recommended academic training for Blacks. They wanted me to take a commercial course, so my mother sent me down to Virginia to finish high school. I think they thought that Blacks didn't have the intelligence to go on. But my mother had taught in a one-

room school in Virginia and she wanted better for her children. My sister Anna went to a private school in Downingtown, and both Julian and Charles took the academic track at Germantown High. I went to college in Virginia where I had a double major in physical education and sociology. I wanted to teach physical education or go

¹ Married women were not allowed to teach at this time.



Germantown High School opened in 1915. Child's mother felt counselors did not recommend academic courses for Black students and sent her son to Virginia to complete high school. GHS archives.

into boys club work, which I had had a very healthy experience with at the Wissahickon Boys Club in Germantown. The director was William S. Coleman, Sr. I never will forget him the longest day I live. He was such a fantastic guy. He had a very lucrative program for us. If you got out of line you got out of the club regardless of the weather. You got one week or two week [suspension] depending on what misdemeanor you committed—such as cussing, smoking in the lavatory, overstaying your time on the pool table, making unusual loud noises at the movie on Saturday night.

We also played ping pong, basketball, cooking, and shoemaking class. I did track, basketball, and football. I ran the 200 low hurdles and the quarter mile. At one time I held the scholastic record for the low hurdles in Philadelphia.

Q. William T. Coleman was the father of President Ford's transportation cabinet member. Do you remember his son?

AC. Sure. We were camp counselors. I think there were only two Black summer camps in the country. One

was Camp Emlen and young "Bumps" Coleman and I were counselors there.²

Q. Do you remember John T. Emlen?

AC. Yes. Quakers started the club. The Board would meet once a month and Mr. Coleman would tell us to mind our p's and q's and say "Good Evening." It wasn't a church-related club. There were no Black Board members—way late, way late. Mrs. Beckett, the wife of Walter Beckett the undertaker, was the first Black on the Board. The employees were Black—Mr. Coleman, Allan Ballard, the program director, and Wallace Smith, the athletic director. I became the athletic director later.

Q. Did you ever go the [Black] YMCA on Rittenhouse Street?

AC. Yes, but they had nothing—one pool table and one ping pong table. We also went to the [Black] YWCA, which was pretty nice. The Negro Tennis Association used to have their national championship up there every year. The players included Eyre Saitch from New York, Ora Mae Washington, Lula Ballard, and Dr. Sylvester Smith from Germantown. There was also "Zack"

² John T. Emlen bought 27 acres of land near Morwood, Montgomery County in the 1930s for the Wissahickon Boys Club to use for outings and camping.

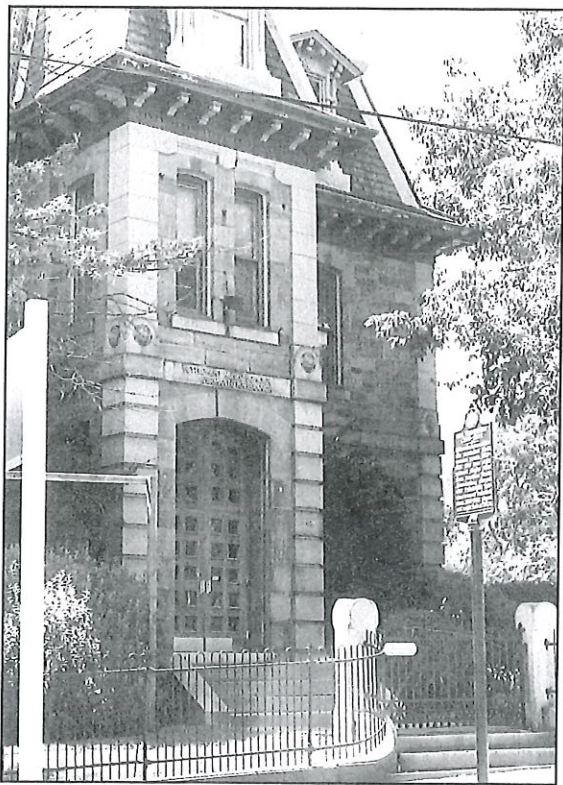
Clayton [Leroy Clayton] from Germantown—he played baseball and basketball. He played with the Harlem Globetrotters and the New York Black Yankees.³

Q. Were there restaurants or caterers you could go to?

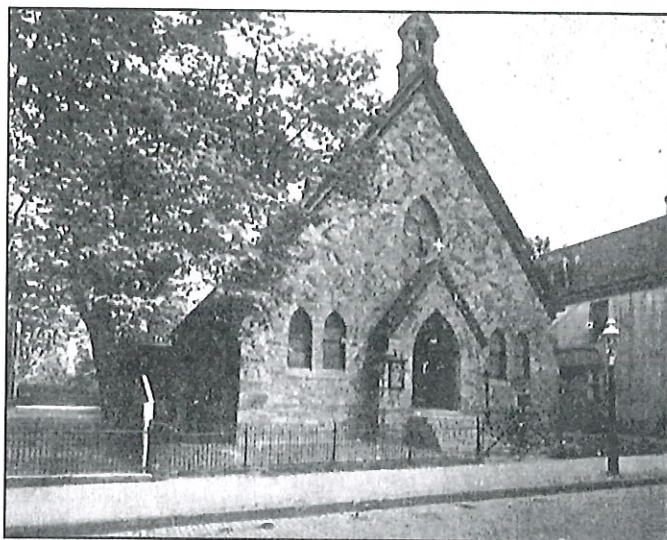
AC. There were just a couple of restaurants. The Dorsey family on McCallum, who were Black, were caterers. They catered to whites in Chestnut Hill and the Main Line. I think they had a concession at one of the manufacturing places. I remember the Trowers too. They were more or less loners. I guess the old man didn't want his children to mix with us. They went to a private school. Trower had a tea room next to Vernon Park. They didn't hire Black folks.

Q. What about the Warrick family?

AC. Their family was OK. Old Dr. Warrick—90% of his patients were white. I understand he's a very good doctor, but if you were Black and went to see him, you waited in the kitchen and the shed for your turn. You did not go to the waiting room. I went to his son who had an office on Rittenhouse Street. It's a big white house. He had both Black and White patients and he made no reservations on where you could wait.



The marker outside Settlement Music School (formerly the Black (or "colored") YWCA) honors Ora Mae Washington (1899–1971), an African American athlete who dominated black women's tennis from 1929–1937. She played and taught here at the YWCA. Photo by Judith Callard, August 2006.



Childs's family attended St. Barnabas Episcopal Church. 1913 photo, GHS archives.

Q. Did your family go to church?

AC. Sure. We went to St. Barnabas, right across the street. It used to be next door.

Q. What did you do after high school?

AC. I went to the Virginia State College for Negroes and graduated in 1937. Then I came back and worked at the Wissahickon Boys Club as athletic director. My boss was William T. Coleman. I earned \$1,200 to \$1,500 a year, which was considered big money. I lived with my parents. Then in 1939 or 1940, they opened the Air Force [Army Air Corps] to Blacks, and I went and joined up. The recruiter at 9th and Chestnut gave me the best Shangri-La of business you ever heard. [For more on Mr. Childs's wartime experiences in the 99th Pursuit Squadron, see the full interview at GHS].

Q. How did things change for Blacks after World War II?

AC. Well, Negroes were buying houses in all-White neighborhoods. Rumor was that they weren't going to let Blacks move east of Stenton Avenue. And all of a sudden, overnight, all the Jews had gone from parts of Germantown, W. Oak Lane, E. Oak Lane. They moved to the suburbs, Wyndmoor etc. For Blacks, everything opened up after the war.

I had a devil-may-care attitude about race before the war, but after the war I did some boycotting, picketing of restaurants, things of that sort.

Germantown was a good place to be raised. The people in my age group—we still talk about our early childhood.

³ Clayton (1921–1997) was also a well-known boxing referee and was the first African American to referee a world title fight.