

## **Shared Stories: African Americans in North Mecklenburg**

Interview with Peggy Rivens, November 5, 2016

Conducted by INTERVIEWER at the Davidson College Library

Transcript edited by Andrés Paz '21

**Summary:** Longtime Cornelius resident Peggy Rivens shares many details about her life, ranging from childhood memories, early school years, her connections to Gethsemane Baptist Church, as well as work experiences and Black businesses in North Mecklenburg. Rivens is the daughter of Lula Bell Houston and granddaughter of Rosa Carr Potts, both of whom she mentions worked at the Davidson College Laundry Service until their retirements. Bell Houston herself worked a total of 60 years at the college, and the Lula Bell's Resource Center is named after her. Rivens shares some details about her work life, mentioning a short period in the 1970s when she worked at the Davidson College Library, later being the first Black person to work at Piedmont Bank Trust, and her further experiences with Eastern Airlines in the late 1970s and 1980s. She talks amply about the Gethsemane Baptist Church and her involvement in it, mentioning people as Rev. Clement Morris and pastor Dr. Ernest E. Jeffries. 74 years old at the time of the interview, Rivens also shares some of her knowledge and opinions about noticeable changes in the Davidson and Cornelius areas.

---

**Interviewer:** If you'll just start with giving me your name and your relationship with the town. Did you grow up in Davidson?

**Peggy Rivens 00:08**

No. I grew up in Cornelius.

**Interviewer:** In Cornelius, right. And so, did you spend most of your childhood there?

**Peggy Rivens:** I did, I did. Most of it in Cornelius. My church is in Davidson, Gethsemane Baptist. So, that's been my home church.

**Interviewer:** Right, and how long have you been at Gethsemane?

**Peggy Rivens:** Oh, God, all my life. And I'm 70-what? I can't even think of how old I am. 74. So, all my life, I grew up in Gethsemane. Had to walk to church, I'll tell you.

**Interviewer:** Right. And how long was the walk for that?

**Peggy Rivens 00:43**

I walked from Cornelius to Davidson, because my grandmother was one of the first ladies that would be there to make the fires and sweep the floor with the brooms and the dust, and so I had to be there, because I was raised by my grandmother.

**Interviewer:** Were you a part of taking care of the church and things like that along with your grandmother?

**Peggy Rivens:** Oh, no, no, no. They did that, she and some of the other ladies. If she didn't walk there, she would catch a ride with one of the members there in the community. We had a couple, Ms. Durr and Mr. Tom McCulloch. We would ride with them if we didn't walk. So, we had to walk from Cornelius to Davidson.

**Interviewer:** My goodness, that is quite—

**Peggy Rivens:** That was every—she was there for church school every Sunday, one or the other.

**Interviewer:** So, you said that you were raised by your grandmother. Can you tell me more about your family?

**Peggy Rivens 1:42**

My grandmother, her name was Rosa Potts, Carr-Potts. Maiden name was Carr. And that was the big family of the church. We had the Carrs and the Brandons that were two of the bigger families there in the church.

**Interviewer:** Kind of like a part of the foundation of the church.

**Peggy Rivens:** Yeah, exactly, exactly. And, of course, other members, family, Sturgess. And I can't think—I'm trying to think of another big family name. But, so, she was very famous. She had the [02:22 inaudible], our first. So, I just been there all my life.

**Interviewer:** That's really special.

**Peggy Rivens:** I had choir and the gospel singers. I don't know if you ever heard them or not. She took an asset. Her custody was organized on Thursday for it.

**Interviewer:** And do you know around when that all started?

**Peggy Rivens 02:43**

Well, now, I think they started—in church history—I have a church history. So, in church history, I think they said that the Carr family came about 1926, I believe it said. And so, I'm going to look just to refresh myself. Just says 1926, both the farmer Potts and family joined Gethsemane—I don't know if she had any of her other siblings there ahead of her or not. But they just been a part of it. And then my mom, Lula Bell Houston, went to part of Davidson College.

**Interviewer:** Tell me more about that.

**Peggy Rivens 03:29**

Yeah, she worked—well, in fact, my grandmother worked for Davidson College laundry. They both worked in the laundry. And I used to go to the laundry, to keep me in the laundry, and fold me up in the clothes, clothes baskets. I remember that, when I was just a little girl, you know, because that's where they were babysitting me, at the laundry. And my grandmother worked there until she retired. And, of course, my mama Rose Lula Bell used to work there until she retired, after 57 years, and went back to work the next day and worked another three years.

**Interviewer:** After she came back to work for those last three years, where did she work then? Still in the Lula Bell's laundry?

**Peggy Rivens:** Say it again?

**Interviewer:** After she retired, you said she went back to work for three years.

**Peggy Rivens:** Still the laundry, yeah, went back to work at the laundry for another three years.

**Interviewer:** That's wonderful.

**Peggy Rivens 04:30**

It is. And actually, I even worked for Davidson College, in the library, in serials and documents. That was in probably the early '70s, for a short while, because I had worked at the bank. We had Piedmont Bank and Trust in Davidson. And I was one of the first Black—well, I was really the first Black person that they hired at the Piedmont Bank and Trust.

**Interviewer:** How was that experience if you don't mind?

**Peggy Rivens:** Well, it was strange entry—I mean not. So, that was before computers. We had to post submissions, and then, of course, I was there when they brought in the computers, and we had to go to Mooresville, Piedmont Bank there, for a short while and back. And the little drive-in down here, it's Wells Fargo now, drive-in, I worked that.

**Interviewer:** That's so special.

**Peggy Rivens 05:34**

It is special. And the junior deacon lived next-door, and her son would bring me tea or whatever down there. But they were nice. It was nice. We had some experiences, but... Funny thing. I had—the ladies that I had worked with in the bank, she was very touchy. So, and she made a comment that she regretted, and she cried all day. She cried all day. And that was—and Betty Washer was my supervisor, and she was a supervisor, and she said, "You're going to have to console Margie, because she's crying all day." I said, "But she's all right." But that was the only incident, really. And believe it or not, I ended up—I went to work for Eastern Airlines in my later years, in the late '70s and in the '80s. I got a call from Margie, of all the people, of all the people. I thought that was so ironic, that she calls, because I worked in reservations, and I got the call from her, and we laughed.

**Interviewer:** Oh, my gracious.

**Peggy Rivens:** That was ironic, that I would get a call from her after so many years. And then, of all the people. And she said, "I think about the times that we had." And we did have good times. So, it was good.

**Interviewer:** That's wonderful. So, you were talking about how you would spend time in the laundry with your mother and grandmother. Did you have brothers and sisters?

**Peggy Rivens 07:21**

Yeah, I do. I have one sister, two brothers. Okay. I feel like my mama and our sisters, we've become sort of like sisters.

**Interviewer:** Really, that's wonderful.

**Peggy Rivens:** I'm her mama now. I have to take care of her, so I'm a mama now.

**Interviewer:** I definitely understand that.

**Peggy Rivens:** Yeah. She's been a backbone of the family. She really has. I'll see what it's going to be. I don't know. She just loved to work.

**Interviewer:** Do you feel like her work ethic was something that really was instilled in you?

**Peggy Rivens:** Yeah, exactly, exactly.

**Interviewer:** And is that something that you've seen throughout your life?

**Peggy Rivens 08:14**

That's all I've seen. Mm-hmm. That's all, because now, it saddens me to see—I think she may be getting a little dementia now, so she's not so—and she can't see. That's the sad part. She doesn't see. But she loves singing. She loves to sing now.

**Interviewer:** Right. That's beautiful.

**Peggy Rivens:** And the church, I don't know, we've gone through so many—well, we did have a split in the church at one time. We were—that was before Pastor Jeffries came.

**Interviewer:** Yes, ma'am. And who was there before Pastor Jeffries?

**Peggy Rivens:** We had—Clement Morris was there for, like, 30-some years. He died in, I think, '90. He died one year, and my grandmother died the next year, so that was the '90s, late '90s, now when I think, it was, '98 or '99 when he died. And from that, we had Achipi Tonga, Reverend Achipi Tonga. And he was there for maybe two years, two, three years. And the church has experienced a split in membership.

**Interviewer:** I see.

**Peggy Rivens 09:58**

Some followed him and others stayed, and then we were under the leadership of Reverend Wilt Conwell. He was an interim pastor, prior to Ernest Jeffries Clement. Okay. So, Jeffries came in, I think, March of 2004. So, he's been there ever since.

**Interviewer:** That's really special.

**Peggy Rivens:** It is. So, it's been good.

**Interviewer:** So, you talked about growing up in Cornelius, but still had the connection in Davidson. Where did you go to school?

**Peggy Rivens 10:35**

We went to school at Ada Jenkins through the eighth grade. Well, to begin with, we were in Cornelius. We had a school there. We went to school, and grades were combined. We had two teachers, and then a third came. But it was Diamond and Mars, Ms. Diamond and Ms. Mars, first and second, third and fourth. And then, we came to Davidson for the fifth grade.

**Interviewer:** Wow.

**Peggy Rivens:** Had a bookmobile come around and give—

**Interviewer:** A bookmobile?

**Peggy Rivens:** We didn't have a library. We had a bookmobile that'd come around for, and we'd get books out of the bookmobile.

**Interviewer:** Was reading something that you and your siblings enjoyed growing up? Or what parts of school were your favorite?

**Peggy Rivens:** See, I'm so much older than they are. I'm, like, seven years older than my brother, and then ten years older than the next brother, like 15 older than my sister. So, they all came after integration. Went to a different school there, from Cornelius to Davidson to Torrence-Lytle in Huntersville.

**Interviewer:** Right. So, you and your friends, what would you all do after school? How did you all spend your time?

**Peggy Rivens:** Oh, that was the best days.

**Interviewer:** I believe it.

**Peggy Rivens 12:11**

That was knowing what growing up was all about. You had fun, you did. Played hopscotch, hide-and-seek, throwing the ball over the house like that.

**Interviewer:** Now, throwing the ball over the house, would that be to see how far someone could make it?

**Peggy Rivens:** Somebody's on the other side. We say, "Throw it over, throw it over," say, "Hand it over." They say, "Okay, here it come."

**Interviewer:** That sounds like a lot of fun.

**Peggy Rivens 12:40**

It was fun. It was fun, I tell you. We kept ourselves busy. And then, we would—at that time, we didn't even have paved streets sometimes. And we would walk, and we didn't have streetlights, of course, so we'd get together and we'd walk around the block, because it was just a circle, really, in Smithville. That's what we called the community, Smithville, the Black community. Still called Smithville. They have a Smithville Park there, named after the—it's just funny. I just think about how you walked in the door, and no lights. Then we would make-believe somebody was—there was a big tree, and that they had hung people by the tree. I don't know if they did hang in the tree or not. So, we'd get to that tree, and then everybody would take off. But it was fun.

**Interviewer:** Sounds like there was a really strong sense of community.

**Peggy Rivens:** Exactly, community. You know, if you did something wrong, then that lady had a chance of correcting you, and then your parents as well.

**Interviewer:** I see. And so, growing up, were there any special places that you all would shop or eat out around here in Cornelius?

**Peggy Rivens 14:06**

Oh, gracious. No, you couldn't shop. I can't remember. See, at that time, I can remember places

being segregated. We would have to go to the back, if you got anything at all. In the restaurant, the little restaurant there in Cornelius—excuse me. I have to turn this off.

**Interviewer:** No problem.

**Peggy Rivens:** Hello? I forgot to turn it off. I'm in a meeting at the Davidson Library. Can I call you back? Hello? Hey, can I call you back? Okay. But now I'm in a—say what? No, no, I'm talking to you now, but I'm in a meeting at the library. Okay. I don't know. It won't be long. Okay. I'm sorry.

**Interviewer:** No problem at all.

**Peggy Rivens 15:27**

There, I'll turn I off. Okay. Yeah. We would go to—I can remember my mom taking us. We would catch the bus. There was this bus called—what was it? It was the Beatties Ford Road bus. It would go down—go out 73 in Cornelius, Cornelius and Catawba Avenue. The Knox family had that bus, and they would take you from out 73 to Beatties Ford Road, and then on in to Trade Street in Charlotte.

**Interviewer:** Really?

**Peggy Rivens:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** And was this a bus that would go throughout the different communities?

**Peggy Rivens:** No, no. I'm just trying to think. I can't recall exactly where we got on the bus, but I know it picked up there, and then we'd go down to—it wasn't like the street bus now. Of course, we had to sit in the back at that time. And I could remember going to Woolworth's. There was this place called Woolworth's. To Delt's and to Woolworth's, and maybe to Atlas. There was this place on the corner called Delt's. It was like a Five and Dime or something like that. So, we had that. And then, I had a little bakery down the street. I can remember that. Then my grandmother would always go and get the donuts and those—what do you call them now? Croissant with cream cheese in it, cloves or something like that. She would get that. I like them to today, but I don't hardly buy them. But we did that.



**Peggy Rivens 17:28**

Then, in Cornelius, eventually, they had this place called Mary Mann's, and so she opened up a dress store in Cornelius. It was a dress store, clothing store for ladies, and then she moved to Davidson. Now they have a bar in it, but it was, what do you call it, a Five and Dime store in Cornelius. Funny, hadn't thought about that. Well, I thought about the Five and Dime, because that's what I called the bar, said, "They got a bar in the Five and Dime." Yeah.

**Interviewer:** So, we're also interested in learning about Black-owned businesses. Do you remember any specifically?

**Peggy Rivens:** At that time, no. No. Now, my uncle in Charlotte had his own barber shop. He was George Carr. He had a barber shop in Charlotte. But here in Cornelius, I don't know if the Clarks had a barber shop at that time or not, or probably the Nortons in Davidson. I just don't remember about the Davidson.

**Interviewer:** I remember you saying that you remember the Five and Dime, because they changed it into a bar. Are there any other changes that you especially remember or that you even see now in the time of Davidson or Cornelius?

**Peggy Rivens 19:00**

You know, I know they had, in Davidson, down where the bank is, there was a dentist over upstairs. Yeah. Withers. So, I know he pulled a tooth of mine, and I don't know if even deadened my nerve or not. But did that, and then we would have to go—that's all they did, was pull teeth. They didn't try to save them or anything, just pull your teeth out. Had that, and then we would have to go to Mooresville, to a dentist up there. In Cornelius now, just up the street from the place that I call the Five and Dime, it was the Five and Dime and the mira-mats, and then there was a little grocery store, the Mayhew Grocery Store. And there was a place where John Cherry had his insurance company. There was a doctor's office there, Dr. Washon. I remember him because someone said something about him just last week. We met this lady, and she was a Washon, and she went on to say who she was related to, and she was related to—but she had married into that family. She said, in fact, he used to be a doctor. I said, "Yeah, I went to him." Just that old.

**Interviewer:** I love connections like that. I really do.

**Peggy Rivens 20:43**

I went to him. Of course, the library in Cornelius has changed too. They have a new library now from what it used to be. But I used to really love to go to the library. When we had the bookmobile, we could only get, like, four or five books at a time. So, my goodness, if we didn't do anything else but read the book, then by Saturday, you've gone through those books, you know. So, it was interesting.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me about the time, the shift from primarily getting books from the bookmobile to being able to go to the Cornelius Library?

**Peggy Rivens:** Well, see, that was—that came sometime later. When we came to Davidson, I don't think they had the bookmobile. I think we had a library in Davidson. At Ada Jenkins, we had a library. Did we have a library? Yeah, we did have a library at Davidson Elementary. So, and we went to the—of course, we had the—I don't think there was any difference in going to the library then. No difference in maybe going—not segregated at that point. I'm trying to think what else I might tell you. It was something I was thinking about, but it's completely left me right now.

**Interviewer:** I understand those times.

**Peggy Rivens 22:16**

Mm-hmm. And I'm just trying to think of—it was church. Our church, Gethsemane Baptist Church, originally was on Potts Street, where they had the habitat houses. And that was at the bottom of the hill. So, that's where we started. And from there, they went through quite a few ministers at that time, because I know during my lifetime, I can remember that we had a Reverend Long, a Reverend Nash, a Reverend Walker, and then Reverend Morris, and Jeffrey Tomlin, and our pastor now, current pastor. And they marched from the old church to the new church in 1977, I think it was. They've been at the new church, new facility since then, since '77. Unfortunately, I couldn't march with them because I was working.

**Interviewer:** I see. And was the march to celebrate the new building?

**Peggy Rivens:** Yeah, going from the old to the new.

**Interviewer:** That's so special.

**Peggy Rivens 23:43**

That was special for them. They broke ground—let's see. They purchased the land in '74, and the church was constructed in '76, and then '77, the Gethsemane Church family marched from Potts Street to the current location. And the church has been very prosperous. They paid off the mortgage two years in advance. They used to go on trips to—I remember going to the park in Highpoint. I think it was Highpoint. Go to a park up there, and they would go off to Sunday school, go to—I think they took trips to the beach, down there.

**Interviewer:** That sounds fun.

**Peggy Rivens:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Are those traditions that you still see represented now in the church?

**Peggy Rivens:** No, they don't do that now. Everything's changed now. They do trips. Maybe they do trips. I don't think we do too many trips now.

**Interviewer:** So, I know you all have Sunday dinners together. What are some other traditions that you can see that have lasted throughout the time of the church's history?

**Peggy Rivens 25:26**

Well, we still have the church anniversary. They still do that, and the homecoming and revival. At one time, we had our church anniversary, and they had a men's day, women's day, children's day, and you learn, and then, of course, the Easter. They would learn poems and things to recite. We had children's day. Boy, I'm trying to access something. I can't remember which one was the children's day, but we did have children's day. Because somebody asked me, said, "What day was children's—when did we have children's day?" You know because somebody else wanted to remember. And I told them, "I don't know when we had children's day." I think it was in June. I don't remember. Yeah, those days are gone, though. And churches we visit, you know, you visit other churches, especially churches right around Davidson and Huntersville. And trying to think. I don't know if we visited that much in Mooresville. But now, as far as the choir, we would go all around and sing. We were a very large choir at one time, and then we're down to four or five members.

**Interviewer:** I see. Like your own special praise and choir all in one.

**Peggy Rivens:** I'll tell you. But we've had some—now, we have, like, the Gethsemane gospel singers have two programs a year. We used to do about three. We would have Gospel Explosion in January, anniversary in May, and at one time, we used to have what we call—excuse me, end of the year, end of the year is male choir singing. It was just for male choirs, and that was at the end of the year. And that was good. We have watched service. We still have that during sunrise service. But other than that, now we're combined with Flake and his church. Lake Forest. We combined with Lake Forest. Was it Thanksgiving time that we—Thanksgiving or Christmas, we combined with them. Thanksgiving, I think it is. This is just one of those things. Yeah. And we have service with them. And then, Christmas, we used to go Fat Boys and eat on Christmas. Yeah, we used to do that for Christmastime. But, of course, Fat Boys gone now, so no more Fat Boys. And then, we got good cooks over there. What's their name? [00:28:38 Ramona Meehan Tocow, Tocow Ministry]. And she, she's good, if you know it's going to be food up there. We've done it at the church sometimes too. And I don't think that we had—they had about food now. We had 12 tribes. Rarely we don't do that anymore. We've done something else to replace that. And then, we've had rainbow tea, yeah, and we don't do that no more. So... Yeah, but it was interesting. A lot of things have stopped.

**Interviewer:** Transition time.

**Peggy Rivens:** Mm-hmm. Transition time. So...

**Interviewer:** Well, is there anything else that you would like to share about growing up in Cornelius or other special memories you'd like to share with us?

**Peggy Rivens:** I can't think right now. I think probably something—is this the only day you're doing this?

**Interviewer:** I believe so, but...

**Peggy Rivens:** I'll just take that. I'll take that, because there's probably something else I need to tell you.

**Interviewer:** No, but you can always get back in touch with Ms. Blodgett and be able to add to whatever you'd like. So, we definitely want to hear.

**Peggy Rivens:** Yeah. I don't know when she's going to finalize it. It'd be good. That's good to know.

**Interviewer:** And will you say your name one more time for reasons of...

**Peggy Rivens:** Okay. Peggy Rivens.

**Interviewer:** Peggy Rivens.

**Peggy Rivens:** Peggy Rivens. Mm-hmm.

**Interviewer:** Well, Ms. Rivens, thank you so much for your time. I really enjoyed talking to you this afternoon.

**Peggy Rivens:** I enjoyed it. Okay.

**Interviewer:** Thank you.

**Peggy Rivens:** Thank you.

**Female Voice [Jan Blodgett]:** Peggy, I have one more thing to ask.

**Peggy Rivens 30:35**

Uh-huh.

**Female Voice [Jan Blodgett]:** Just so we've got a face to go with the voice, is it okay if I take a picture? We can take it together if you want.

**Peggy Rivens:** Look at my hair.

**Female Voice [Jan Blodgett]:** I know, but—I'm willing to have my picture taken standing next to you, because, if you don't wear something. But you look pretty good, I think.

*Laughing*

**Female Voice [Jan Blodgett]:** I'll let you look and see. So, let's see. Oh. Well, we'll see if it'll show up again. Yep, that's nice.

**Peggy Rivens:** Okay, that'll do. It's me. It's not the best. *Laughing*

*End of recording.*