

**June Simmons-McRae
Mashapaug Pond Oral History Interview**

March 13, 2013

35 Sea Breeze Lane, Bristol, Rhode Island

Interviewee: June Simmons-McRae (JS)

Interviewer: Abigail Ettelman (AE)

[Bracketed words] indicate action. **[Numbers]** are time-codes corresponding with the audio, marked approximately every 5 minutes.

Part I

[Part II took place on April 2, 2013]

AE: [0:00] (technical difficulties) So, now it's definitely recording.

JS: Of course as you know my name is June Simmons-McRae. My preferred name is June. My first name actually is Selma and I was named after my godmother, who is Selma Simmons and she later became Radford. Early on, in the West Elmwood neighborhood, there were the family of: Bournes, Jennings on the immediate street, which was 45 Pacific Avenue, and across the street were the mother and father of Andrew Bell the second, I guess, who was a funeral director in Providence. I didn't realize at the time, in fact it was not until I returned here in 1994, that many of my neighbors who I assumed were just as I, black, African-American, with probably hints or more than hints of Native American blood, because it really wasn't discussed, it wasn't important, in those days as to who you were or what your culture was. The neighborhood was very very integrated. There were no problems in terms at all in terms of friends that we played with, everyone was the same and we always looked out and reached out to everyone that was in our neighborhood. It was a very closely knit neighborhood. My brother Ralph can remember many of the names of many people, more so than I, like the Baskins and the, oh I can't think of some of the other names, the Weedans, that now became Native American- or they were Native American and I never realized at that time because they were very friendly with my family. But they were isolated from the community and they were right down the street next to the railroad tracks, but they considered themselves different. I know the difference know because they considered themselves as Native American and they truly became Native American in attitude and air. Is there another question you have?

AE: Uh, yes. So that's your impression of and your memories of the Mashapaug pond area.

JS: Yes.

AE: Could you tell me a little bit about what it was like to adjust to moving to East Providence? If there was a difference, what was it?

JS: Well, there was a difference in terms of the fact that - and this is not a difference, this is a similarity between Providence and East Providence - my father had always been a property owner. I never knew anything different. And I didn't realize at the time

that all of my neighbors were renters. When we moved to East Providence, there was a family that lived across the street from the property that my father wished to purchase and they were staunch New Englanders. Their last name was Shed and they vowed that there wouldn't, when they found out we would be moving across the street from them at what was then and now considered prized property, they made the statement and it later became public, that they would never have a nigger live across the street from them. Or graduate from East Providence High School. Consequently, my oldest brother Billy and my brother Ralph graduated from Hope High School. They continued to drive- to take the bus, all the way to Hope High School in order to graduate. My youngest brother Teddy, he was the one who was very, kind of flamboyant in whatever he was- the ace basketball player, very popular and very well known. Well, that was okay, it was all right for him, but truly enough, the neighbors across the street continued to keep their vow alive. **[5:13]** Of course, I was very very young, I'm eight years younger than my youngest brother was. So therefore it didn't affect me as much and because I was so young, I could reach out to any neighborhood and it was perfectly okay. My friends were Italian, they were French, and later I found Portuguese. And integration for me was very commonplace. Actually, it was for my brothers, too. Later I found that the next street from me was Dunbar Avenue and Dunbar Avenue- all of the members of Dunbar Avenue were also property owners and they occupied all of Dunbar Avenue. And it was almost segregation in reverse because I don't remember hardly a white family moving on Dunbar Avenue because they kept the property extremely well, they built new homes on Dunbar Avenue, and they maintained their exclusiveness. But the irony of the thing was, I guess that's how you say some people became middle to upper middle or lower middle class, but. I don't remember what all the men did for a livelihood, but I remember many of the women did what I called it carpetbagging because they would take the bus and do housework. But when they came home it was different because they were then the lady of the house and the ladies in the neighborhood. I remember also as a very young child because I was the one who was - I don't call myself the favorite child, but everyone [doted] on me in the house, so I've never known what it is to be poor. I've always - didn't consider myself to be an elitist, but I always was the one to kind of not aspire, it was almost borne in me. I like the arts, I love classical music, but I will also say I guess I got much of that from my father as well, because my father and my mother were lovers of classical music. My father had the greatest collection of classical music you could ever imagine and he also retained and collected historic books. I have a few of them that I will share with Abigail that remain with me in my possession because both of my parents are now deceased. Junior high school, elementary school, we all went to school together, I learned, even though I was Protestant, I learned the Catholic catechism simply because all of my friends were Catholic and I was Protestant and I was the one who had to read the catechism in order for them to be able to prepare for their holy communion. Margie Pray was one of my dear friends, my Caucasian friends, realizing that different ethnicities did not make a difference and also Ethel DiCristoforo, who was Italian. I later met her again in oh about 2005 and I asked what happened to her because we were such dear friends. She would come to my house and eat quite often and I would go into her house and learn a lot of things, like the fact that Italian babies were bathed in olive oil and swaddled in clothing until they got to be about one year old. But going back to friend Ethel, she presently

lives a few doors down the street from my brother Ralph and she consequently told me that she had to drop out of school, I guess when she was about the 8th grade, to help care for her family. [10:13] So now at my present age, I'm now beginning to realize what poor-ism is. Because I never felt it. By the way, I can say to you that the property that my father purchased at 4- I think it was 400 or 4 something, on North Broadway, it was a few acres right on North Broadway and he was able to purchase the property through his white lawyer for a dollar in order to purchase the property. And he developed the property, enhanced it, it was at one time a florist's, a floral - I can't say it was a floral shop, but I guess they had greenery so the grounds were absolutely beautiful. And also to tell you that I was a poor little rich girl, my father built an iceskating pond for me in the backyard. So I always had my roller skating, or ice skating rink in the back. And one of the things that was so important to all of us, to reinforce the unity of the social-ness of the community, my parents would always have a clambake in a part of the backyard where they, my father and the men of the community, would dig a big hole and the men would go out and get the rocks from the sea and seaweed and build the ... what is it, the clambake. [laughs] My parents would provide all of the food and they would put white potatoes, sweet potatoes, quite often we had plenty of land for growing, so we took the corn from the backyard and whatever, and they would put I remember steamers, buckets and buckets of steamers where the men would gather them. I don't know whether they purchased them or my father purchased them, but there was enough to suffice the entire neighborhood. That was one thing that we really really looked forward to, when all the neighbors would come together, and that would be black, white, Italian, whatever. I remember the Mazzerotis, down the street, I remember the Fifes, I can't remember all of the names of all of the neighbors, but it was just a wonderful wonderful period in my life.

AE: And this was at the house on North Broadway?

JS: North Broadway. And the house still exists by the way, and they have changed the area, the property area, into a shopping center.

AE: Lord. [laughs] So much like the area, that area is now a shopping center, the area you grew up in in Mashapaug is now an industrial park.

JS: Yes.

AE: I know you were very young when you moved away, and that means you were older when you found out that- or, it happened later, that the industrial park was created.

JS: It was not until after my father was killed.

AE: Oh right, yes.

JS: Yes, my- we were living on North Broadway at the time and my uncle Al who interestingly enough, I didn't realize at the time but I knew he looked different, but he was Chinese, but he was also my godfather. And he came to the high school- I was in junior high school, in East Providence was the combined junior high - high school. They were separate but they were together, and he told me to gather my books and things, that I had to go home. I asked him why and he did not tell me. He said "you'll know when you get home." When I got home, I heard my mother screaming and crying, and then I found that the Pawtucket Ready-Mix truck had run over my father and my father was then on Central Avenue in East Providence, where he was building two homes side by side for my brothers, for each of the boys who came out of the military, he would build a home for them in order to begin - for them to begin their new life as civilians.

AE: That is amazing and horrible. [phone rings] Let me pause-

JS: Can I-?

AE: Oh yes. [turns off recording] [15:40]

[Second recording begins]

AE: [0:00] Now we are recording again and just to say again: my name is Abigail Ettelman, we are currently in- I am currently interviewing June Simmons-McRae at her home at 35 Sea Breeze Lane in Bristol, Rhode Island. It is March 22nd, 2013 and it is about 1:45 in the afternoon. All right, starting again, so you were discussing, you had just finished discussing your father's death. And I don't know if you want to continue talking about that or if you want to talk about your family before your father died- that might be a little bit less-

JS: Well, I feel it every day but it's not any longer stressful but I feel a tremendous loss in a great man, especially for his time. But it happened - our family owned property on Central Avenue in East Providence and for each of my brothers that came out of the service, he initiated a home for them. The homes on Central Avenue were being built for my brother Teddy, who is now deceased, about three years ago, and my brother Ralph who is still living in East Providence. It was about high noon and the Pawtucket Ready-Mix cement trucks were getting ready to leave the property on Central Avenue and as usual they would invite my father to come along with them and my father told my brothers to go ahead for lunch with all of the guys that were working on the project at that time. And my father ran toward the Ready Mix truck and they did not hear him apparently, he jumped on the side board, the running boards that they had at that time, and he missed the running boards and fell back and the wheels went over him. Currently, it is my understanding that my father died in my brother's arms. My brother Billy, Ralph, and Teddy. Later on, the homes were completed. Ralph, when he came out of the service, occupied his home and on the other side was Teddy, my brother Teddy, who chose to remain in the service. By this time, he transferred when it was it was time for him to what they call "re-up", he transferred from the Navy into the Air Force and Teddy remained in the Air Force over thirty years. And he, I forgot, separated- ironically the Air Force offered payment out, in other words for x number or for each year, he could buy out one year. When Teddy came out of the service, he had over forty years in the military. And he's the youngest boy.

AE: (inaudible- possibly: That's impressive.)

JS: When Teddy came out, he had been working in procurement and he then moved to the West Coast, where he was a director of whatever the company he was in procurement.

AE: Wow. That is amazing. Would you mind talking a little bit about how your parents in particular, because you spoken a lot about your brothers, but maybe, could you talk a little bit about your particular parents' personalities? For example, when we were on the phone, scheduling this interview, you spoke a lot about your mother and what it was like for her during the Great Depression, so I would love to hear more about her.

JS: Well, I know you want to hear about my mother, but I also have to backtrack a little bit because my grandparents came from Boston before they came here. Now I know originally they were not from Boston, they were from the South. [5:00] I'm not quite sure

where my grandparents on my father's side came from, but let me see. My mother, she even though the statistics don't state that my mother went to finishing school and she became a teacher, but when she came to Rhode Island and the Boston area, of course, she was not certified here, nor did they certify blacks in Rhode Island. There were only two women of color that graduated from the University of Rhode Island. I remember one person's last name was Simmons and I've forgotten the name of the other young lady. But even though they were primary graduates of Rhode Island College, they were not able to get jobs here in the state and consequently they moved away. So you can see what little chance my mother would have even though she was a degreed person and she also was a teacher but she had - did not work in the state of Rhode Island, nor would my father allow her to work. He was a very proud person. My mother was a very bright woman, very bright, very sensitive and her side of the family, they were extremely poised, extremely aware of a positive culture, in other words, when I was very very young child, my mother saw to it that I had a set of china. And it was a little baby set, but I still have I think one of the cups that was left. So my mother believed in all of the finery, she set the table every day for my father, she had a table cloth and I don't know then what the quality would be, but I guess it was the best of what we had. And in the middle of the table, she would tell me that she would also place a fresh flower on the table for my father when he came home to eat at lunchtime. So that was the beginning of my beginning in terms of why I have developed with a love of art and classical music and decorating and all of that kind of thing. Because I was also spoiled so there was nothing else for me to do but follow the lead of my parents. My mother's side, they were professional, all professional people, and my father's side, they were hands people, they worked with their hands. My uncle George was a cabinetmaker and my father of course as you well know now built homes and whatever, that was- you know, he was considered a contractor. And my mother told me he was an architect, but of course he was not certified because there was no certification for a black man in architecture. But he built quite a few in this area. They were very religious people, very spiritual people, I'd say more spiritual, because we always felt "do unto others as you would have others do unto you." We always believed in the 10 Commandments. We always went to church. But church was just an edifice, it was very important to them, but I think that the spiritual embracing that went on was very important to my parents and they also became stabilizers of our faith, all of us, all of the children. My mother, father, and all of the offspring thereof.

AE: Now, when you're talking about the spirituality of your family and how they embedded that in you, in your brothers, was there a social aspect to that? In terms of church outings or was it more that you were the Protestant family in a sea of Catholics?

[10:13]

JS: Mmhmm.

AE: How did that relate to people outside of your family?

JS: Well, we knew there were differences because there were basic differences in our skin coloring and our complexion. As a matter of fact, with the five of us, we're all different. You know, we're just like God's sunbeam [laughs] rays or something or whatever you might want to call it. And also we knew there were people who had different dialects and accents. But that didn't matter either. It was either Mrs. Jones or Mrs. Smith or whomever it might be. So I can only say I don't think socially it made a

difference. I think that it probably was the beginning, as far as I know, of an extension of who we are because I just found recently that on my mother's side of the family they're considered mulatto. They're all considered mulatto. As a matter of fact, there's a segment of my mother's side of the family that all became white and they all went to Chicago. So I guess little would they expect me to be here and be their cousins, first cousins [laughs].

AE: [laughs] That's very interesting, especially based on what you were saying earlier about how much integration there was in Mashapaug and in your life in East Providence.

JS: Uh huh, but I just considered then we were all colored. We were known as colored but I don't ever remember the word even coming up. I'm sure there must have been, but I don't remember.

AE: Right. So that must have been quite shocking then when you went to East Providence and there was that horrible neighbor who wouldn't-

JS: But she was only one of many, only one person. And it wasn't that we were ignorant of the fact that there were people like her around but she didn't interfere with our lives at all. She lived over there, we lived over here, and we all completed high school and were successful. So she couldn't stop that, she couldn't stop the growth of our family and what it was going to be. So I just say shame on her. [laughs]

AE: That's an amazing way to think about it. Um going back to things that we discussed on the phone, you had a really interesting story about the Hurricane of '38. [RS laughs] Now, if you want to discuss that, that would be fantastic, if you-

JS: I'll try. We lived at that time at 45 Pacific Avenue and Mashapaug Pond was just down the street, a few city blocks away. And that's where my brothers would swim all the way across Mashapaug Pond. I never saw it, but they did tell me that this was one of the accomplishments that they made. I remember the winds came and we had a radio, I'm sure, in the house and it said to prepare for the storm and whatever. And I remember as the winds came up, of course, at that time they did not name hurricanes, it was the first one that I remember because that was before Carol, Hurricane Carol. As the waters began rising, I remember my mother - Joyce Bourne, who was living next door to me, she was my best girlfriend at the time, even though we were three or four, we had to join hands, my father first, my - I guess I was next, then Joyce and then my mother at the end. My father secured the house in which we live, which was a high rise house. When I say high rise, our house had I don't know how large it was, but I know it was a pretty good house, size house. But immediately next door my father- my grandmother and grandfather on my father's side lived next door, that was my father's house too, and but that was a lower slung house and during the winds, the winds were so strong, that we had to form a human chain and go next door to my grandparents [15:14]. And I was told, I don't know how true it was, but I can only believe, there was no reason not to believe, that the storm was so furious that at the graveyards, and I don't know which one, but closer to Mashapaug Pond or somewhere in that area or on the other side of the water, but I heard that there were coffins that would bang on people's back door. It was pretty furious but short time after that, I don't know the conditions of the houses that were left, but I know that that was around the time I moved to East Providence.

AE: Yes, I think it was, from what you've told me. That's an incredible story, sort of hard to believe though [laughs] obviously I believe-

JS: Yes!

AE: Hard to imagine. Could you describe what it looked like to be in the middle of a storm that big, as far as you remember, to be in the middle of a storm that big near such a large body of water?

JS: I wouldn't be able to describe- that was just a very pointed part of my remembering, but I do have upstairs the following hurricane, and I don't know if then we were living in West Elmwood or not, or those are remembrances of the hurricane, but I do have the book I collected from my parents.

AE: Wow, that would be really great to see if you wanted to share.

JS: Yes, if I can find it, it's in my filing cabinets somewhere I think.

AE: Sure. I can always also come back another day [laughs], if you were willing. You've talked about the families that lived in the area of the pond, you've talked about how your family got there, a little bit, but would you talk about-

JS: I guess.

AE: A little bit, you talked about how your family, your grandparents were originally in Boston-

JS: Yes, I understand that because Ralph told me. Ralph would know more about that, but because my grandparents were old, even at that time, and I was only, I'd say, roughly four or five, so I don't know too much.

AE: It's also one of those things that's really interesting too, when you're trying to remember things that young, the strangest things will stick in your head and the really quote unquote "important" things will be completely gone. Are there any stories that come up, because you said earlier that you meet up with people from that area and you do still have that connection to people who used to live there and the connections to people who used to live or still live in East Providence? Do you have any sort of things that come up when you discuss life back then?

JS: Not so much that come back, although I have within the past five years seen Joyce Bourne, my best friend, she found that I was living here again and I was invited to her 80th birthday and mine was coming up, so you can imagine- I had seen her from afar and that was really a wonderful thing. I understand that Evelyn Jennings is still around, and I know some of the Bournes, that's Joyce's brothers and sisters, I think some of them are still around, but ironically not too long ago I was attending a church with my family, it was a church that was new to me, it was Hope Christian Church, I think, in Seekonk, and it was just by chance we were there - my daughter had attended a couple of Sundays prior to that, and I met one of the assistant pastors, and he was a person of color, and the church was extremely - it was very integrated but it was predominantly white [19:55]. And the assistant pastor was a person of color and I walked up to him and I said, "You know, you're very familiar, your name is very familiar," I said did you know the-, I think his last name was ... I think his name was Baskin, can't remember what his last name was, I said "Do you remember the Baskin family?" I can't remember the names of different families. And he said yes, he said you may know my mother, and his mother's name was Millicent. And yes, I said I'd like to meet your mother again, I haven't seen her in many years, I knew her very well. He was very surprised. I said, if you have your mother come back in two Sundays, I'll come back too and I'll meet. And I

did meet Millicent after all those years and Millicent, by chance, was the soloist on that Sunday and had a beautiful beautiful voice. And so that was a wonderful meeting for me. I have not met anyone from the Jennings family that lived two doors over from me, but they were also I think related to the Jennings that lived on the other side of Calhoun Avenue. And I have since seen some of them. The Butler family, they eventually moved on the other side of my mother and they moved in that house right after Dr. Ulysses Carter died and his wife Mrs. Carter by that time moved next door to my mother who was also widowed, so they lived together for a period of time. And of course Ralph probably shared with you that my mother died in 1999 at the age of 103. So she outlived my father over fifty years.

AE: Wow.

JS: Okay? [laughs]

AE: That is amazing.

JS: Isn't that amazing?

AE: No wonder you and your brother are so [slaps leg] hale and hearty. That's incredible. But one thing that I find very interesting is that meeting you had with the pastor completely by chance. How did that make you feel?

JS: It was good, but I'm a very outgoing person, so I engulf all people. In fact, almost everyone I see or meet, for some reason, I find that I put my arms around them and say hello. So seeing him was just the takeoff of the "oh I'm so glad to see you." And it's real, it really is how I feel.

AE: That's wonderful. We need more people like you.

JS: [laughs] You're kind.

AE: So you've established that you had really strong connections to a lot of people in the Mashapaug area and in the East Providence area, all of these different areas of Providence, so what sparked your move to New Jersey?

JS: Well, I married in the early '60s. I graduated from East Providence High School in the early fifties and went to the local schools here, taking a course or two, and whatever I could really afford to do because I was without my father and my mother she was the overseer, she was our mother, but she was still a homemaker. And after taking several courses, I met a gentlemen who lived, well, visited next door to me, and he was a McRae and consequently I not only met him but I married him and we moved to New Jersey, to his home. **[25:00]** That's when I began attending William Patterson University and finished undergraduate school and went to graduate school because I was very interested in curriculum development and testing measurements. All of the educational developments that I was unfamiliar with, such as what are the different strategies for education, what is a better way of teaching this group than that group, how do I get to children who are limited in terms of background but then are some are limited in background but were very progressive in terms of wanting to learn. So I was always very inquisitive so that's when I went on and finished that. We moved to South Jersey, Willingborough(?), New Jersey. I went onto postgraduate work at Temple and that's when my husband became an administrator in Trenton. And I just continued working in the area of curriculum development and teaching strategies to individuals and administrators, basically, in school districts- the nuances that were taking place.

AE: That sounds like you had a very full and rich life in New Jersey. Your daughter grew up there?

JS: My daughter, yes, was born in Patterson, New Jersey. It was interesting too because she was born at Barnard Hospital and my first experience after she was born in education was in Fairlawn, New Jersey. In Fairlawn, I was the first person of color- I thought I was the first, until I found out there was a fellow whose name was Adam Richberg, and Adam was hired - that's when districts were accepting applications from out of state without seeing the individual - well, if you hear the name Adam and you hear the name Richberg, what is the first ethnic group that you think of? Jewish. Well, Adam was very brown in stature and he had a Caucasian wife and that was way back in the early 60s and you can imagine they couldn't send him back, so therefore they had to accept him. That was Adam, so he preceded me. I think his area was in guidance. So sometimes we have a lot of fun with that because when I went on and got my graduate degree, and it was in curriculum, they were begging teachers and they wanted me to come in and work as a therapist in the public schools of Glenrock, New Jersey. Well, I sent in my application and they told me they were very happy to have me come in and whatever, but when they found out what my ethnic background is, they told me to- that they were so happy to interview me, but they were going to keep my application on file until the first opening came. So that was around maybe I guess 1964. Here it is, 2013, and I still haven't heard from them. [laughs] Isn't that funny?

AE: [laughs] That is funny. I mean, they're the ones that lost out.

JS: [laughs] It was funny, but that's the way it was.

AE: So that must be - it's an interesting thing to think about, that being so long ago, but-

JS: But it was not.

AE: But it's really not. That's sixty, fifty years ago.

JS: Yes, well, I remember when I first moved to Patterson I wanted to work. I had not completed my undergraduate degree at that time. I took the examination for the post office and I passed with a high score. [29:45] As a matter of fact, I've forgotten who tested at that time, so they told me I did exceptionally well on the test, and they would have a job - they had to find an opening that would be appropriate and on the board, on one of their boards, there was a Robert Fee, F-E-E, who was the director of Boy Scouts of America in Wayne, New Jersey, that was about ten miles going north of where I lived. And by being Boy Scouts of America, someone had to offer me a job based on the test, so he offered me a job as a secretary at Boy Scouts of America in Wayne. That's really the joy of it to me. I couldn't type, I couldn't do shorthand, but they had to offer me a job. So eventually I worked there and did well until I told them "this is not the life for me, I have to go back to school."

AE: When you went back to school was it- actually, pause that question, you've talked a lot about the different academic things and endeavors that you've done and done well at, and what I was wondering is (and your family in general seems to be very educated and very focused on education, which are two different things!)-

JS: Absolutely.

AE: I was just wondering what sparked that in you.

JS: My parents. My brothers, if they were all here to verify, my parents would say, "what college are you going to." It wasn't really a matter of what college I was going to, but- excuse me. There was not a question of if we were going to college, it would be a matter of which one. I think that was one of the motivators, plus there was a minister that had recently graduated from Boston University and his name was Dr. Samuel

Proctor. He was recently, at that time, appointed as president of Richmond Union University in Richmond, Virginia and there were several teenagers, of course there wasn't too much for us to do socially except to gather at those little dances, what do you call them, you know those little Western dances where you could turn around but not get too close [laughs] at the church. It was the teen program at the church after school. Dr. Proctor took a personal interest in all of us and when he went to Virginia Union to his appointment, he suggested to our parents that he take us with him. Of those persons, there was Audrey Hopkins, let me see.. [thinks for a few seconds] there was James McDaniel, who became a Superior Court Judge in Boston, there was Kenneth Walker, who presently is the chairperson at ACI, is that what you call it? He's the president of the board for... When they come out of jail. The board of review of whatever as persons are exiting from jail to see if they're worthy or not. I've forgotten what the title is.

AE: I don't think I ever knew it.

JS: No. And let me see, there was also... I can't think.

AE: We can come back to it?

JS: Yes... McDaniel- I can't remember.

AE: I always, it happens whenever I'm forgetting something [Her dog Spirit barks] to not think about it for a while [laughs] [Spirit barks more, her daughter Wendy is coming home].

JS: It's the Parkinson's, too.

AE: Oh!

JS: Oh, that's Wendy.

AE: Oh, I see. So I'm just going to shut off the-. **[35:36]**

[END OF INTERVIEW]