

# germantown CRIER

A Publication of the Germantown Historical Society

\$10.00



## Between the Wars

### A House on Church Lane

## BETWEEN THE WARS: LIFE IN GERMANTOWN BETWEEN WORLD WAR I AND WORLD WAR II

*In the early 1990s the Germantown Historical Society conducted an oral history project under the direction of Louise Strawbridge, in conjunction with the Philadelphia Alumni Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta. Older Germantown residents, many of them African Americans, were interviewed on tape about growing up in Germantown between the first and second World Wars. These tapes offer each person's unique story and highlight shared experiences. Many of those interviewed, for example, attended the Hill School, Roosevelt Junior High, Germantown High School, the Wissahickon Boys Club, and the [Black] YWCA. Those interviewed knew the value of their memories of Germantown and generously gave their time and effort to the project. We have selected five interviews, four of African Americans and one of two White sisters. Each interview has been edited and shortened. All the tapes are held at the Germantown Historical Society. The transcriptions of these interviews have been carried out by various volunteers. The assistance of Jim Moore, librarian of the African American Genealogy Group, has been invaluable—transcribing tapes, doing additional research, including obtaining photographs, and checking each interview.*

### Alyce Jackson Alexander

*On August 6, 1992 Gregory Woods interviewed 69-year-old Alyce Jackson Alexander at her home at 262 E. Slocum Street. She lived her whole life in Germantown. Her primary occupations were catering and beautician work.*

I was born January 4, 1923 on Osceola Street. My mother's name was Corinthia Reily Jackson. She and her family came from Orangeburg, South Carolina, and lived on Rubicam Street. She was a housewife and did day work in Chestnut Hill—she washed, ironed, cooked, cleaned. She did a lot of laundry for the First Methodist Church on High Street and Germantown Avenue. She ironed their choir robes.

She also had two or three families she worked for, including Edith and Harriet Pentland. Miss Edith Pentland was a schoolteacher at Pastorius School. Harriet was a music teacher.<sup>1</sup> The families liked my mother and they were interested in what we did and helped us in every way they could. She also worked for a doctor in Olney who helped pay one of my sisters' tuition to Morgan State College. In the 1930s my mother earned about \$6 to \$10 a day.

My mother went to the Joseph E. Hill School and Germantown High School. She said they were very strict at the Hill School and she got a very good education. She and my father were very interested in schooling for us four girls. Her father was a schoolteacher in Orangeburg and my grandmother graduated from Clifton University.<sup>2</sup>

My father, Jesse Patterson Jackson, came from Orange, Virginia. He worked at the Martin F. Connor Coal Yard. He not only worked in the coal yard, he could practically build a house. He worked in construction and was interested in electronics. He saw to it to the best of his ability that we got what we wanted. For example, I was very interested in home economics, baking, cooking, cleaning, doing hair. I went to beauty culture school and needed a shampoo board. In his work he came across one and brought it home for me. He set up a little shop for me in my home.



Alyce Jackson

<sup>1</sup> The 1925 City Directory shows Edith and Harriet Pentland living at 137 E. Walnut Lane.

<sup>2</sup> Alyce's grandmother was only able to get domestic work in spite of graduating from college. Her grandfather had also graduated from Clifton but could get only manual labor jobs including helping to build the Broad Street Subway (information from Connie Ragsdale).

They rented their first house on Osceola Street right off Haines Street, where I was born.<sup>3</sup> They just tore those houses down. It was a two-story house, three rooms upstairs, three rooms downstairs.

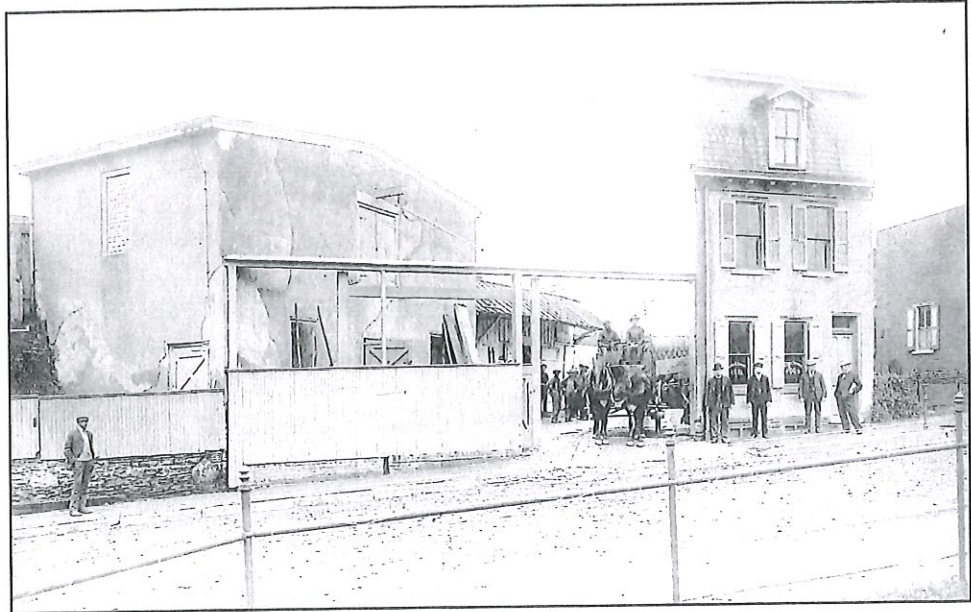
The first house I remember was 559 East Haines Street. I think we moved there in about 1929.<sup>4</sup> I lived there until I got married in 1946. It was a cute little house—two-story, a porch, a nice little side yard. It was two houses together right where the coal yard was. It had a gate, a nice little play area. There were my parents and us four girls. We were two in each room.

*Q.* Did you eat all family meals together?

*Alyce Jackson Alexander.* Yes, we were a close-knit family. We always had grace and talked about what was happening in the world. That was good talking time. And we all expressed ourselves. We had healthy meals, not a lot of junk food like they have today. We always had things like cabbage, potatoes, and some meat or chicken, and



Alyce's parents, Jesse and Corintha Jackson in the driveway near their house at 559 E. Haines Street in 1947. The Reading Railroad bridge can be seen behind them. Courtesy Connie Ragsdale.



Martin F. Connor coal and wood yard. Undated photo, GHS archives.

some kind of fruit. We had a really heavy meal on Sundays because at that time people used to visit on Sundays. So we had turkey, greens, string beans—all kinds of vegetables. We had a lot of family from out of town and our house was like an open book. My parents were very friendly, well-known in Germantown. They had a lot of friends and we always entertained quite a bit. We went to church a lot, then our friends would come back to the Jacksons (that's what we were known as) for tea. We used to serve cinnamon toast and tea.

My family were very involved in school activities, church activities, and the YWCA of Germantown. They knew everything that went on. Mother and Father always insisted that we were going to college. My three sisters



Martin Connor, Jesse Jackson's employer, started his coal business on E. Haines Street in 1892. GHS archives.

<sup>3</sup> 5850 Osceola St (City Directory 1923).

<sup>4</sup> Not listed in 1930 or 1935 City directory. Connor Coal Company built the houses for employees. The census lists the house as 559 E. High Street (it is behind an apartment building rather than fronting onto Haines Street). A number of years ago Tague Lumber took these houses down to expand their lumber yard. (Information from Connie Ragsdale.)



Alyce Jackson (r.) and Bernice Murray playing tennis at the (Black) YWCA c. 1938. Courtesy Connie Ragsdale.

went and I went to a vocational school. Mother made sure we got to whatever school we wanted. Back in the 30s, 40s, 50s, things were so prejudiced. But we always worked to get a step ahead.

*Q.* What chores did you have at home?

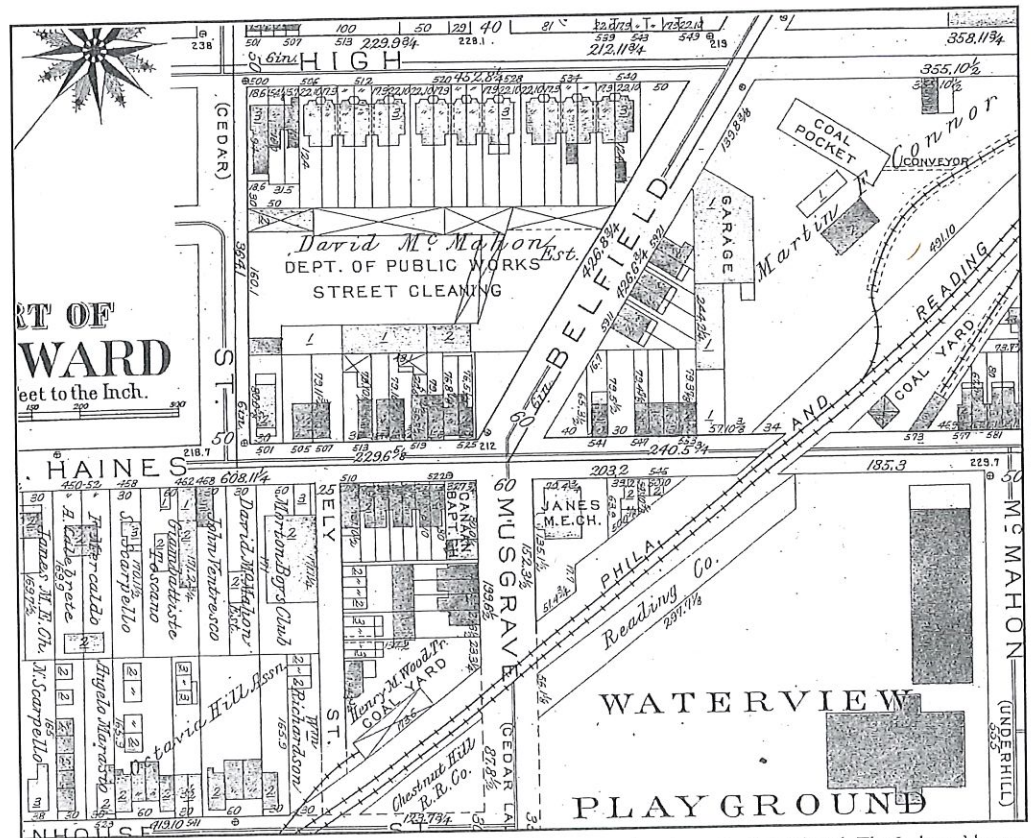
*AJA.* We were all assigned things on Saturday mornings. We slept late, then we had to clean our rooms. We helped my mother with the washing. Someone had to clean the bathroom. We washed the dishes, cleaned the yard outside, hung curtains, hung up clothes, [took care of] pets. I was the most domesticated one in the family. I did a lot of the cooking and I did everybody's hair.

My parents thought character was very important—the way you carried yourself. We couldn't hang out and be out at all times. We always obeyed them. The four of us girls stuck together and told on one another. Our mother was like the head of the house as far as giving you good advice. If we didn't mind our parents, we couldn't go out to different dances they had at the Y and to parks or playgrounds in the area. I

didn't grow up with drugs—we didn't have those problems. Our parents always supervised us and so did their friends. If we did anything wrong it would get back to them before we got home! We lived poor but we lived good.

We were in a mixed neighborhood with Italians and Irish. They would always fight and call you names—you know how kids are. But we did go to the Waterview Playground right across the street. We weren't always allowed to go swimming over there—only on certain days could the Black children go and swim. There was a little pool outside we could go in. Our mother said if they don't want you to go swimming we didn't go swimming in it. That was the first thing about prejudice that we saw. But it didn't seem to bother us as much as it does now. We overlooked it.

We didn't have to worry about the playground. We weren't allowed to go to the playground anyway after school because we'd have our housework, our lessons to do. And we had different activities in our house. We had a piano and all kinds of records. We sang classical music. We used to go and hear music at clubs in South Philadelphia. We'd take the 23 trolley all the way. We all sang and worked with theater groups—the Germantown



This section of the 1923 22nd Ward Atlas shows the Martin Connor coal yard next to the railroad. The Jacksons' house was built a few years later on the empty lot next to 553 E. Haines. Across Haines was James M.E. Church, which the Jacksons attended and across the railroad tracks was the Waterview Playground. GHS archives.

YWCA [for African Americans] was very well known for educational activities, dances, lectures, arts and crafts, swimming, current affairs. They kept you well posted on the achievements of all our Black people. They had teas, club groups, prominent speakers such as Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, a lot of the prominent ministers, such as Rev. Coleman and Rev. Johns. The speakers discussed slavery, the history of Black people, how to get jobs, educate ourselves to prepare for the future.

The neighborhood was mostly Italians and Blacks and also Irish. It was well-mixed. It wasn't overly crowded. We got along together. All of us were very friendly and neighborly. We'd play out in the big yard and eat Italian food and fuss with Dominic and Theresa. We became very good friends with them. We lived there a long time.

*Q.* What kind of jobs did the Italians and Irish do?

*AJA.* The Italians were very good in building contracting. They had stores called rag shops where people would sell things. We'd save a lot of paper and go down on Saturdays and they'd weigh them and you'd get money. You'd find old soda bottles in the neighborhood and sell those for 2 or 3 cents. We also would go into different people's houses on a Saturday and clean their bathrooms and things like that. We'd get paid for that. Then we'd go and buy candy from shops on Germantown Avenue.

*Q.* Where did you go to church?

*AJA.* Janes United Methodist Church on Haines Street near Germantown Avenue. The minister was J. E. A. Johns. They taught us Black history at the church. You didn't get it in the Philadelphia schools. We had books and literature and different speakers. Morgan State University stems from the Methodist Church—the church has always educated its kids. If you were out of work or sick, church members would bring you food, take care of your children, take care of the sick. You'd have more food than you could eat. It was not only Blacks from the neighborhood who helped, Whites were friendlier than they are today.

*Q.* Where did you go to school?

*AJA.* Joseph E. Hill School on Rittenhouse Street, where my mother had gone—where practically all of [Black] Germantown went. We had good teachers there—they were strict and very learned people. A lot of them went to Black schools in the South. They took time with you. That was the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. We did math, reading, writing—and handwriting. Look at the handwriting today. Mine is beautiful compared to my daughter's. At our class reunion, we talked about the strict teachers. Some were mean. They accepted no excuses not to learn.

After the Hill School, I went to Roosevelt Junior High on Musgrave Street.<sup>5</sup> The racial makeup was half and half. I gradually made friends with the Italian girls and the Irish girls. There were more Jewish people there. Our motto was, and I brought it up with my children, you can always do whatever you want to do in this life. But you have to learn more than the white people because they'll take them first. It's a bad way to raise children but you have to tell them. You have to do better than the average person.

After Roosevelt I went to Gratz High School. I didn't want to go to Germantown High because I began to feel the prejudice. A lot of the rich, ritzy people went to Germantown—I didn't want to put myself under pressure. I wanted to go around with my own people, with my own friends. Gratz was nice—the prejudice was there but it was more Jewish people. We got along good together. I stayed there for a year and then they built Dobbins Vocational School. I was interested in home economics so I went there. They had the regular classes but also nutrition, things pertaining to food and health care. You could specialize in meats or bakery—I did general foods. We cooked and sold the food. We were taught how to set up a table in a restaurant, how to entertain, how to shop, diet for hospitals and institutions.

After I got out of Dobbins [in 1941] I went to Apex Beauty School. I took up beautician work. While I was in Dobbins I worked for a place that's still around—it was in Mt. Airy—the Woman's Exchange. I made cakes, pies, cookies, salad—they had a store there at Washington Lane and they would sell what we made. I worked at that for a long time. And I did catering on my own—I catered parties and weddings. I still do that every now and then.

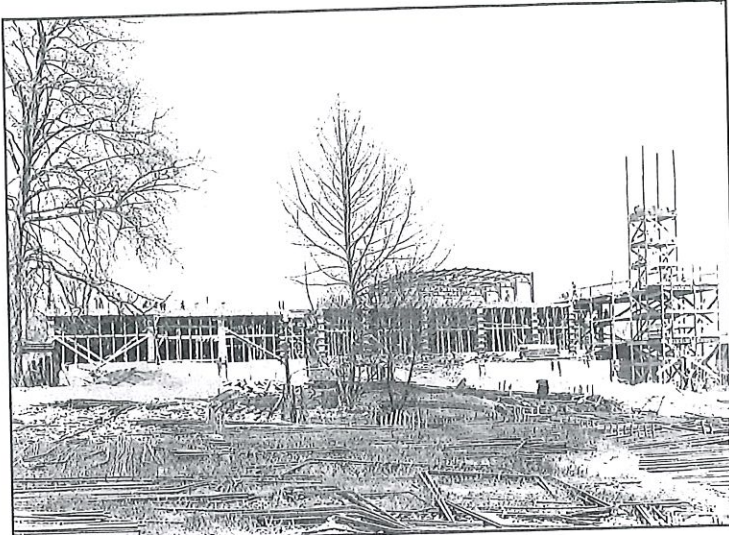
Then I took up beauty culture and got a beauty shop.

I married in 1946. My husband was from upstate New York. He was in the army and I met him at the YWCA, where we had dances.<sup>6</sup> He said he knew no prejudice until he trained in Mississippi. He was highly educated—he was an electronics engineer.



Hill School students in 1933. GHS archives.

<sup>5</sup> As well as working in the coal yard, Ms. Alexander's father also worked for a brick company, hauling bricks to where Roosevelt Junior High was being built. His four daughters all went to Roosevelt and his grandchildren did too. Granddaughter Connie Ragsdale taught there for 10 of her 32 years teaching.



Alyce Jackson attended Roosevelt Junior High, as did her sisters and their children. The school is seen here under construction in 1923. Photograph by Bernard B. Wolff. GHS archives.

During the war I worked at the Woman's Exchange, Asher's Candy Store, and I did beauty work. After the war, things changed—I think the war helped change attitudes. There were more opportunities, people were better educated, everyone had more money. [Black people] could afford to buy homes. White people gradually moved away—Blacks could move in and better themselves. We moved here [E. Slocum Street] in 1960. My parents had moved next door here in 1955. They were the first Black people on the block.

There was discrimination in Germantown. Even at Asher's—I was the first Black candy coater they hired. I went when I was about 18 or 19 [c.1941] and applied for a job. They put me on the second floor—lifting big heavy trays, then pounding in the sugar etc. I did that for a couple of days. Then I went to Mr. Asher and said, "I can't do that. It's too heavy for me." "Well, what would you like to do?" he asked. "Can I coat candy?" "Do you know how to do it?" "No, but I can learn." Mr. Asher said, "I'll try you for a week in the coating room." One of the women taught me what to do. Also I went and bought a big square of chocolate and some hard candy and told my father I needed a piece of marble, so I could learn to coat candy at home. My father found a piece of marble and I worked in the kitchen every night until I got it. I became one of the top girls doing it. Mr. Asher said one day, "You are doing good. You certainly are a chocolate girl now." I didn't like that remark, though we were all covered with chocolate when we worked. You had to swallow a lot back then. But

when I got married, Mr. Asher threw me a big shower.<sup>7</sup> I went to interview for a white beauty shop. They only wanted me to shampoo, not do perms. This was before I got my own beauty shop. I swallowed hard and just did shampoos and putting color in. One day, someone was out, and I asked, "How do you wrap a perm?" It was no different from what I had learned before! I got it right away and carried on from there. I worked at other beauty shops—one where Frank Rizzo and Mrs. Rizzo came. It was in Mt. Airy and then moved to Glenside.

I just retired from the beauty shop in 1988. I worked for two shops for about twenty years. Both jobs [the beauty shop and Asher's] I had to fight my way into. I was successful in both of them.

*Q.* Can you describe what it was like to walk up and down Germantown Avenue when you were young?

*AJA.* There were nice little stores but you were always watched as a Black person. You just didn't have the freedom to shop and do what you wanted to—"Don't touch that unless you are going to pay for it." One store was Muddy's. We used to call her "Dirty Muddy"—"Put it down. Put it down. That's a penny. That's 2 cents." You learned to be a good shopper. I think my grandchildren don't feel it like I felt it. There were a few Black businesses in Germantown—bakeries, barber shops, beauty shops, restaurants.



Alyce Jackson at a 1942 dance at the (Black) YWCA. The USO organized dances for wounded African American veterans. Courtesy Connie Ragsdale.

<sup>6</sup> Wounded African American soldiers came from Valley Forge military hospital for dances at the [Black] YWCA.  
<sup>7</sup> Asher's Candy store was in Germantown at 5537 Germantown Avenue and 20 Woodlawn Street from 1899 to 1998.



Alyce Jackson married Earl Alexander in 1946. Courtesy Connie Ragsdale.

Rowell's was one of the big stores. I went there to get my wedding gown in 1942 but they wouldn't let me try it on because I was Black. The lady said, "Well, all you have to do is give me your measurements and I will see to it that you get the gown." So we said, "No way." My mother and I went down to South Philadelphia to Stern's, a Jewish store, where I could try it on. Germantown stores were very prejudiced against Blacks.

After the war, I joined some protests. Blacks stopped going to different restaurants such as Lintons and other stores and movie houses. The church, various organizations, and businesses helped organize boycotts. We read about issues in the *Philadelphia Tribune* and the *Afro-American*. We had one or two radio stations.

Q. Do you remember any Black professionals in Germantown when you were growing up?

AJA. Dr. Bailey was a medical doctor, also Dr. Carter. Handy and Walter Beckett were undertakers. And the florist on Coulter Street. And the hat lady.<sup>8</sup> Doc Marshall, druggist, on Baynton Street. We had a lot of prominent Blacks.

Q. Tell me about the role complexion played.

AJA. It was a little thing Black people had against their own. Light-skinned people thought they would do better if they looked almost white. They segregated themselves from the average brown-skinned person. It never really bothered me. The light-skinned people found out it didn't make any difference. In my own family, a distant cousin tried to pass. She took care of her family and everything but she never wanted anyone to come see her.

My sister graduated from Einstein nursing school. Another sister went to Morgan State College. Now my granddaughter is getting ready to go to college!



Alyce Jackson Alexander at a Hill School reunion June 1992. Photograph by Louise Strawbridge. GHS archives.



The back production room at Asher's July 1, 1998, the day before the candy store closed in Germantown after 99 years. GHS archives.

*Acknowledgments:*

*Thanks to Connie Ragsdale (Alyce Jackson Alexander's daughter), and Mildred Jackson Barbour and Doris Jackson Harris (Alyce Jackson Alexander's sisters)*

<sup>8</sup> The hat lady was on Germantown Avenue near Haines Street.