

Great Migration Oral History Project  
 Real World History  
 2015-2016

Oral History interview with Ms. Mabel Mitchell

Interview Summary: In this oral history interview, Ms. Mabel Mitchell, a longtime DC resident, discusses her life and experiences moving from Raleigh, North Carolina, to Washington, DC. Ms. Mitchell discusses her early life in Raleigh, her move to Washington, DC, in the early 1950s, her transition to living and working in DC, and her long career in the government. Ms. Mitchell also talks about segregation and racial discrimination in Washington, as well as gentrification in the city in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This oral history interview was conducted by a DC high school student as part of a class assignment on the Great Migration in [Real World History](#).

Timestamp	Topics
[00:00:02.01]	Interviewer introduced interview.
[00:00:18.01]	<u>Question:</u> “So, could you first start off by telling me where you were born? . . . And what was your childhood like?”
[00:00:23.00]	Mabel Mitchell (MM) discusses her upbringing and family life in Raleigh, NC. She talks about how she spent summers in Bible school and visiting extended family in the countryside in NC and in New York City.
[00:04:40.20]	<u>Question:</u> “[W]hat was the city like at the time? . . . What was Raleigh like at the time you were growing up?”
[00:04:48.02]	MM describes the Raleigh of her childhood in the 1940s. In particular, MM discusses school segregation in the area, both at the college level and at the level of primary and secondary schools.
[00:09:44.15]	<u>Question:</u> “So, what other differences did you notice in the city, segregation-wise? Or, did you experience that growing up?”
[00:09:52.19]	MM discusses segregation in Raleigh, particularly in commercial businesses.
[00:14:14.18]	MM recounts an experience she had in high school in which a white waitress was rude and disrespectful to her just because she was Black.
[00:16:23.10]	MM points out that segregation permeated all aspects of society in the South and explains that it wasn’t until the Civil Rights Movement that changes were made. She then discusses pay discrimination in Raleigh and discusses how Black people only had access to certain jobs.

[00:18:35.29]	<u>Question:</u> “ <i>So yeah, as we were talking about employment, I was curious if your mom was employed?</i> ”
[00:18:42.05]	MM explains that her mother did domestic work in Raleigh but that she also worked at a neighborhood store run by the family. She also explains that her mother lived and worked in New York for several years of her childhood. MM then discusses how Black people were migrating to cities in the North and West to escape segregation and get better jobs but they encountered pay discrimination outside of the South as well.
[00:23:14.01]	<u>Question:</u> “ <i>Did that contribute to you wanting to leave North Carolina?</i> ”
[00:23:22.10]	MM explains that the lack of access to jobs beyond domestic work was a motivating factor in her decision to leave Raleigh and discusses how her high school helped set her up to come to Washington and get a government job. She adds that the fact that she had family in DC was also a contributing factor. MM then discusses how, though government jobs made Washington an attractive place to move, there was still racial discrimination within the government.
[00:28:55.00]	MM explains that her first job in Washington was at People’s Drugstore and that she moved in with her aunt at 821 I Street SE. She then discusses how her aunt and all the other homeowners on the block lost their homes when the government expanded the Marine Barracks.
[00:31:20.09]	<u>Question:</u> “ <i>So you came to the city alone?</i> ”
[00:31:22.13]	MM explains that, though she came to DC alone, she moved in with her aunt.
[00:31:44.21]	<u>Question:</u> “ <i>So you held your job at the drugstore, and then, did you ever look for other employment?</i> ”
[00:31:52.27]	MM explains that she had no intention of staying in her job at the drugstore and that her goal was to work in the government and go to college. She then explains that she had a daughter who she had to leave in the care of her mother and grandmother when she came to DC.
[00:34:03.02]	MM discusses the different jobs she had before finally securing employment in the government. In talking about her experience working at a dry cleaners in Chevy Chase, MM recounts a frustrating experience in which she had to train a newly-hired white woman who was being paid 150% of what she was making. She then reiterates that

	there was still pay discrimination and unequal promotions in the government.
[00:38:44.18]	<u>Question:</u> <i>“Did you notice any changes based on administration?”</i>
[00:39:04.12]	MM explains that there were big differences between administrations in terms of pay for government workers. In particular, she discusses the passage of the Windfall Elimination Provision under the Reagan Administration.
[00:41:46.19]	<u>Question:</u> <i>“So, do you want to expand on some of the segregation that still exists today?”</i>
[00:41:54.06]	MM discusses the different forms of segregation she encountered in Washington: Pay discrimination, discriminatory hiring, and commercial segregation. She then discusses displacement of Black Washingtonians from different sections of the city (Southwest and Georgetown) and talks about residential segregation.
[00:47:18.20]	<u>Question:</u> <i>“So what has your experience been watching gentrification? And the, I guess, like neighborhoods that were previously Black become more white, what are your feelings towards that?”</i>
[00:47:34.08]	MM discusses how redevelopment and gentrification are pricing many Black Washingtonians out of the city.
[00:49:17.07]	<u>Question:</u> <i>“So, when you got to DC, did you start voting? Or—?”</i>
[00:49:25.05]	MM explains that she has been voting ever since Washingtonians gained the right to vote.
[00:49:43.16]	<u>Question:</u> <i>“How old were you when you decided to come to DC?”</i>
[00:49:49.24]	MM states that she was in her early 20s when she came to Washington.
[00:49:51.12]	<u>Question:</u> <i>“Did your daughter ever come to live with you in DC?”</i>
[00:49:57.20]	MM explains that her daughter would sometimes come up to DC during the summertime when she was growing up. She then adds that her daughter went to North Carolina Central University and explains that she came to DC every summer while in college to work in the city.
[00:51:02.16]	<u>Question:</u> <i>“Was her experience growing up in North Carolina different than yours?”</i>
[00:51:08.03]	MM explains that her daughter had a different experience in Raleigh since segregation was not as intense and there were new high schools.

	She adds schools were desegregating when her daughter went to high school.
[00:52:02.01]	<u>Question:</u> “[G]oing back to the actual traveling here, what was your first impression of DC the first time you visited for your, for the wedding?”
[00:52:29.08]	MM discusses how she was impressed with Washington when she first came to the city. She also reiterates that employment opportunities for Black people in Raleigh were limited and that she was particularly interested in the prospect of better jobs.
[00:54:27.29]	<u>Question:</u> “[I]s there anything else you would like to add?”
[00:54:37.03]	MM explains that she didn’t have any difficulty finding housing in DC since she moved in with an aunt.
[00:54:47.15]	<u>Question:</u> “[W]as there ever a time when you doubted your choice to leave North Carolina?”
[00:54:56.05]	MM explains that she did have regrets and that it was difficult to leave her family, especially her daughter. “ <i>The family relationship is what really had my doubts. But I just had to make a sacrifice.</i> ”
[00:55:52.25]	<u>Question:</u> “Did any of your other relatives or friends from North Carolina join you in DC after you came? Or come to DC because they saw you coming?”
[00:56:04.00]	MM explains that people from her family and many others she knew made similar moves for similar reasons. She then reiterates that it wasn’t about her living conditions, but that economic opportunity and escape from Jim Crow were motivating factors. “ <i>So, I didn't have any problems with my living conditions there; it was just the idea of making more money and getting a better job, and being treated like a, more like a human being.</i> ”
[00:57:09.04]	<u>Question:</u> “What would you say was your favorite job in DC in the government?”
[00:57:17.21]	MM recounts some of the different jobs she held throughout her 41-year career in the government and reflects on her life. She then points out that segregation and racism were just aspects of life for Black people until the Civil Rights Movement.
[01:00:21.28]	<u>Question:</u> “Do you think looking towards the future, people will let go of racism and society will become more integrated?”

[01:00:32.21]	MM explains that she hopes and prays that society moves beyond racism but that things seem to be moving backwards.
[01:00:51.17]	<u>Question:</u> <i>“Anything else you would like to add, or—?”</i>
[01:00:58.16]	MM states that she doesn’t have anything to add.
[01:01:07.16]	<u>Question:</u> <i>“Did you, were there any big similarities from Raleigh and DC when you came? . . . [In respect to] segregation and quality of life.”</i>
[01:01:35.12]	MM explains that, though her quality of life was good in North Carolina, quality of life is always better when you’re making more money. She then explains that segregation wasn’t all that different in Washington and that segregation still exists. MM then wonders whether segregation and racism will ever be eradicated.
[01:04:12.15]	<u>Question:</u> <i>“Did you see yourself as part of the migration to the North?”</i>
[01:04:26.06]	MM explains that she wasn’t thinking about leaving Raleigh until she was a little older and learned about the opportunities outside of the South.
[01:05:33.19]	<u>Question:</u> <i>“And as far as other people around you moving to the North as well, did you see a big movement of people? Or, was it more of a trickle of people moving up North?”</i>
[01:05:52.05]	MM explains that many people of her generation were leaving the South because of segregation and the prospect of making more money up north.
[01:06:21.07]	<u>Question:</u> <i>“[I]s there anything else you would like to add?”</i>
[01:06:30.25]	MM states that she has nothing more to add. The interviewer then thanks MM for the interview and closes out the recording.