

An Interview with
Alfred Buckingham Downs

May 18, 1977

Interviewed by

Clinton Bagley

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
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- BAGLEY: This is Clinton Bagley interviewing Alfred Downs on May 18, 1977. We are at Poticaw (inaudible), Jackson County, and your permanent address is?
- DOWNS: 2315 Pine Avenue, Gulfport.
- BAGLEY: Gulfport. Mr. Downs, how do you spell Poticaw?
- DOWNS: P-O-T-I-C-A-W
- BAGLEY: Well, it's a very relaxing place. For this interview with the Department of Archives and History, we'd like some background information such as where you were born, and when, and who your parents were, and where did you attend school?
- DOWNS: I was born in Reform, Alabama, July 4, 1915. My parents were Alfred Buckingham Downs, same name as mine, and Katherine Shelton Downs. We lived in Reform for the first five years of my life and then moved to Columbus.
- BAGLEY: Where was Reform?
- DOWNS: About 30 miles due east of Columbus, Mississippi. It's in the extreme western part of Alabama. Of course, I attended school in Columbus, the public schools there, and one year of college at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, and then I graduated from Mississippi State.
- BAGLEY: Well the Department has been particularly interested in the family papers that you have. Approximately how many letters do you think were in this collection?
- DOWNS: Well, the total number of letters was 6,500. These date from the early 1700's well into the 1900's.
- BAGLEY: Well, could you tell us how you happened to have these family papers and if there is any genealogical material in them and other related topics. Because most people now, for some reason, probably bicentennial, or even Haley's book, there's a growing interest in genealogy. Could you tell us about this material that you have and have donated to the archives?
- DOWNS: Yes.
- BAGLEY: And some of the more interesting letters that might be in there.
- DOWNS: I hope you'll interrupt me if I go on too long.

BAGLEY: That's fine.

DOWNS: I suppose the reason that we had so many family letters was, there were probably two fold. First place, letter writing was the only means of communicating with relatives and friends at distance at that time. And at least the ladies in our family for generations have been savers for letters and they've past these on down to successive generations. Also, members of the family on both sides have been interested in family history and really, a good many of the letters are inquiries to friends and relatives concerning family connections.

BAGLEY: Which two families?

DOWNS: My father's family and my mother's family.

BAGLEY: Downs?

DOWNS: Downs, and she was Kathleen Winston. My mother was Kathleen Winston Shelton, and principally the Winston's and Frye's.

Bagley: How do you spell that?

Downs: Well, they spelled it two ways, F-r-y-e and F-r-y, but generally the F-r-y-e was accepted the earlier spelling. The ancestor's on the down side say even more letters than on my mother's side. Through my paternal grandmother, her name was Clara Muir-Buckingham Downs.

BAGLEY: Clara what?

DOWNS: Muir...M-u-i-r, I believe that's a scotch name. She later became Mrs. T. F. Wilson. She married a Doctor Wilson after my grandfather died. Some of the earliest letters that were handed through by her side of the family were a series of 20 letters, written by her, my grandmother's grandfather, James Muir, and her great Uncle, John Muir and during the period of 1781-1789. These letters reflect the way of life in the Chesapeake Bay area. They lived on the east shore then. This was immediately following the Revolutionary War, well during and following the Revolutionary War, and one of the letters in particular cites the join celebrating at the defeat of Cornwallis. In the same family line, predating by two or three generations, there are several legal papers, documents that were initiated by my grandmother's great-great grandfather Thomas Nevitt.

BAGLEY: How do you spell that?

DOWNS: N-E- ,well, two ways, N-e-v-e-t-t, or N-e-v-i-t, or N-e-v-i-t-t, and spelled

different ways sometimes in the same document. These letters include, or these documents, rather, include Thomas Nevitt's own seven year indenture in 1702 to learn the quote, the art of navigational sales, unquote. He was 18 at the time.

BAGLEY: Now where was he born?

DOWNS: He was born in Dorchester County, England, and his father was a doctor and was a physician, and indentured him to a man, I believe that I've forgotten exactly, but I believe it was a Mr. Bundy.

BAGLEY: Bundy?

DOWNS: Mm-hmm, who had chicks. This same grandmother, Clara Muir Buckingham Downs, inherited from her father, of Buckingham, a series of more than 20 letters written by my grandmother's aunt Harriet Maria Buckingham Champlin, C-h-a-m-p-l-i-n, she was in New Orleans and was writing to her parents in Predonia, New York during the years 1861-1875. Aunt Harriet had been in New Orleans, of course this was the 1861-1875, that was during the Civil War and Reconstruction time, and although she was born and raised in New York, she'd been in New Orleans for 15-20 years prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, and so was a (inaudible) Southerner and had all the emotions and fire of the Southern people and she didn't hesitate to express these feelings to her parents. Of course the letters provide the vivid reflection of family life and sentiment in the South during those excruciating years of war and reconstruction and carpet bag rule. This grandmother that I've been talking about, married Alfred Cleveland Downs II, whose great grandfather, Henry Douglas Downs, had come to Mississippi, in Claiborne and Warren County, in 1798, to claim land that had been granted to his father, William Downs, for services in war, that's the Revolutionary War, and for serving in a company with John Cerreal(sp), the great bend of the Tennessee River after the close of the war. That's what's now in Alabama, of course. Ol' Henry Downs had been active in the early politics in Mississippi. I'm going into this because this is really why my family saved these letters and how they came by these things. Ol' Henry Downs had been active in, as I say, in the early politics in the Mississippi territory and he was one of two representatives from Warren County at the first Mississippi Constitutional Convention in 1817, I think it was. This great grandfather's son, Alfred Claiborne Downs the first, was one of the highly successful planters along the Big Black River, and he and his wife, Mary Jane Robinson Downs, they had been among the organizers of the St. Aldman's Church, at Bovina, and their plantation was just a few miles southwest of Bovina. This grandmother, the grandmother of my grandfather, also saved letters. And she passed these on to her daughter-in-law, Latisha Booker Vick Downs. She was the daughter of John Wesley Vick and the granddaughter of the original Newitt Vick, who they credit with the

founding of Vicksburg, or at least where Vicksburg got its name. She passed on, this grandmother passed on to my great grandmother Lati Vick, more than a hundred family letters during the period 1814 to 1862. And you may remember that these were (inaudible) like you have. And we have the 1863 daily journal of my great grandmother Lati Vick, which, well I say my great grandmother Lati Vick, Lati Vick Downs, that was written after my great grandfather's death when she was living with her two young sons at her father's plantation at Anguilla. Her father, John Wesley Vick, had a plantation at Anguilla. And of course, the general portrays, first hand, the lifestyle of a non-combatant Mississippi delta farmer plantation owner during the year, actually the fall of Vicksburg. And it's fascinating reading, though very difficult to read the original. This great grandmother, Lati Vick Downs was a letter saver in her own right, and she instilled this same trait in her son, my grandfather, Alfred C. Downs II, consequently dating from grandmother Lati Vick's 1863 journal until my grandfather's death in 1906, we have several hundred letters written by members of the family, which all add together to give an accurate picture of the family's character, of the individual's various individual's character, their lifestyle, joy's, sorrows, politics, religion, it just tells about.... Well, in addition to these letters that I mentioned, the same grandmother I talked about first, Clara Buckingham Downs, made extensive notes about home, really life and we have detailed generals written by my aunt Lati Vick Downs, whose unmarried daughter lived with her until her death in 1944. With these notes and generals it was just a matter of tedious, but highly interesting effort to put together the story of my grandmother's life from 1864 to 1944 for our progeny to review. Because I want my grandchildren to know more about their family background and to obtain this knowledge easily and pleasantly, I've written, in brief narrative form, a chapter on the life and interests and activity of each of our ancestors and the downfall, based on the great amount of information reported in the letters and other papers that was saved by the ladies in the family. To date, I've written about the lives of all of them down to the life of my father. And someday, I may getting around to adding a short chapter about my own life and maybe even a few paragraphs about my sons, just to get it current. I've given copies of this booklet, I put it in loose leaf form and a cardboard binder type thing, and I've given copies of this to my son and my sister and her two children. The point being, to make it easy for them to know about the family's history.

BAGLEY: Now, you've mentioned your son and your sister and your sister's children, what are their names and where do they live?

DOWNES: Well, my son has the same name that I do and he currently is working for a Westinghouse Aerospace facility in Laurel, Maryland, that's a suburb of Baltimore. My sister is Nelly Clara Downs-Harvey. She married Thomas Clowell Harvey, who died a few years ago. She lives in Columbus, Mississippi. She has two children. One, a daughter, Katherine Downs

Harvey-Philip, who married Bob Philip, who works with a banking firm in Nashville, Tennessee, and she had a son, Thomas Clowell Harvey Jr., whose an attorney in Columbus, Mississippi. Incidentally, when my father died, young Thomas Harvey expressed an interest in having the place, renovating it. So we, my sister and I, of course, I'm sure my sister gave him her interest, and I sold him my interest in the home, and so he now lives in the home in which sister and I were reared.

BAGLEY: This is in Columbus?

DOWNS: Columbus, yes.

BAGLEY: Mrs. Wilson had a place, a plantation, what was it called?

DOWNS: Linlithgow Plantation

BAGLEY: How do you spell that?

DOWNS: L-i-n-l-i-t-h-g-o-w, I believe this name originally was a Scottish, was the name of a Scottish location or possibly castle, I'm not positive.

BAGLEY: Where was this place?

DOWNS: In Washington County, Mississippi, about a mile south of Arcola.

BAGLEY: On Old Highway 61?

DOWNS: On Old Highway 61, it's about 11 miles south of Leland. And then a 20 mile drive to Greenville.

BAGLEY: Did you ever visit there?

DOWNS: Oh yes, I spent a month to six weeks every summer there and occasional short visits at other times of the year.

BAGLEY: Did you see at that time, in your teens, these papers?

DOWNS: Oh yes.

BAGLEY: Did you realize the value of them then? Well of course you probably didn't.

DOWNS: I didn't.

BAGLEY: She did?

DOWNS: My grandmother and aunt did, and they took great pains to make the

grandchildren, my sister and I, conscious of our family, the background and history, and things. The interests in these things. They were trying to perpetuate the interests in these things.

BAGLEY: What did you do when you visited that place? Probably in the summer time, wouldn't you?

DOWNS: Yes, in the summer I was very fond of Dr. Wilson, my step-grandfather, and he carried me with him sometimes on his rounds. Leaving me in the car, of course, while he tended to his patients. Back then doctors made house calls, particularly country doctors. And then (inaudible) he made his rounds to look after the plantation, and I'd go with him. I milked the cows, rode horse back, and even drove the tractor a little. Not for any productive work, but for the fun of doing it. And just thoroughly enjoyed the place very much. Occasionally played on the Indian mounds that were just (inaudible) through there. And of course, I was just fascinated by the size of the romance associated with this kind of thing.

BAGLEY: Well, Mrs. Wilson moved to Arcola when?

DOWNS: Right after my grandfather died in 1906 and she established herself there. The house that my grandfather had was inadequate.

BAGLEY: So that house was inadequate. Did she build another one?

DOWNS: Yes, she and my aunt Leti came there with her stepfather, John Cowling. John Cowling was the second husband of great grandmother Leti Vick. I don't know if you can keep all these names straight. But anyhow, they lived under rather difficult circumstances, as I understand it while they were building the new house. But I believe they did move into it, in fact, some of her notes said they moved into the house, even though it wasn't complete, in December, 1906.

BAGLEY: Well my recollections of that place, Linlithgow, were beautiful pecan trees around.

DOWNS: Yes, my grandfather planted those pecan trees in 1887, and he was quite proud of that pecan grove, and in fact this provided, although they lived in Chattanooga at that time, he spent a good bit of his time at the place in Washington County and the pecan trees rather afforded a substantial help to his income.

BAGLEY: Was this a new process, adventure so to speak?

DOWNS: You mean the place in the Delta?

- BAGLEY: Not that, but growing pecans?
- DOWNS: Yes, this, the letters indicate that he and Grandpa Cowling, my step great-grandfather Cowling, discussed the potential advantages of having a pecan grove, and so he decided to go ahead with it, and I believe initially, planted 500 trees. I think it covered, well I believe it totals now about 80 acres, but initially, at first planting, he planted about 40 acres, and I think now the pecan grove is an 80 acre grove.
- BAGLEY: Where did he purchase the trees or the plants?
- DOWNS: I believe he got them from a nursery in Alabama somewhere, but I'm not positive. That information is in one of the letters, but I just don't remember the exact place.
- BAGLEY: Was there any indication that some of the members of the family thought it was foolish doing this? Had this been successful in other places?
- DOWNS: I'm not sure but I think that there was no....
- BAGLEY: No opposition?
- DOWNS: No opposition to this effort. Everybody was proud and so was he. My grandmother enjoyed the condo. After my grandfather's death, she and my aunt had the pecans harvested and were quite busy during the season with the pecans. One of the things that she, of course, they had some good years and some bad years, but one of the things that she liked to tell was that she had designated a certain tree or a certain several trees as her church trees, and she said that whether, and she gave the income from those trees, kept those pecans separate, and the income from those trees, she gave to the church and she said, regardless, she might not have a pecan anywhere else in the grove, but those trees bore fruit and she made good harvest off those trees every year.
- BAGLEY: That's very biblical. Do you have, along with this collection, not only letters, diaries, and journals, but any family trees, or charts?
- DOWNS: Oh yes, and as I said, that we have letters where they, where members of my family had written other, I guess to relatives, friends, to ask about family connections and my grandmother and aunt, particularly, were careful to record any information that they got, and to site the source. And so, many of the branches of the family, we had detailed charts going back about several hundred years, in many branches of the family. Of course, and, they made at least two trips, maybe more to England and Scotland, and whenever they did, they looked up further information about the forbearers before they left England. So we do have a great deal of information. With the exception of

the Downs papers and some Dew letters on my mother's side, most of this information is the more conventional, statistical form of family tree type thing. His name was so and so, he married so and so, they were born, then they died on setting such a dates. In other words, there's not much a personality reflective. But as you can see, having letters, particularly in the numbers, you begin to feel like you knew these people.

- BAGLEY: (audio goes out and cuts back on in mid-sentence)...Arcola, actually have these letters. She was kind of the depository for them.
- DOWNS: Yes.
- BAGLEY: Then she moved in the 1930's, to where?
- DOWNS: To Columbus.
- BAGLEY: To Columbus?
- DOWNS: She came to Columbus, yes. And of course, brought her belongings, including the letters to Columbus with her, and then, after her death, very little was done with them. Well, nothing was done with them, in fact. I guess, theoretically, they belonged to my father. But he, although being interested, although he was interested in family history, the other interests occupied his time, and, so it wasn't until after his death that sister and I acquired them and I guess by virtue of my retirement after years ago, I had time to, and I've been interested through all the years, but I have had time in the past few years to work with them and so have done it and thoroughly enjoyed it.
- BAGLEY: Of course, we're mainly, with the Archives and History, interested in the written word, but you have many family heirlooms that were at Arcola, and I've noticed you have photographs in this collection of members of the family, as well as the pictorial inventory of the furnishings. What happened to the belfry that I saw in one of the pictures in the house?
- DOWNS: Well, let me answer the question maybe, in two parts. The bell itself, I got from my grandmother. She brought the bell to Columbus with her.
- BAGLEY: How much did it weigh?
- DOWNS: I believe it was about 350, believe it was 352, 352 pounds. It was a very large bell, I think built by the Paul Revere, well it was brass and had some silver content. It was a real gem. Anyway, my wife and I gave the bell, we gave the bell to the Episcopal Church in Laurel.
- BAGLEY: St. John's?

- DOWNS: Yes, this was in, oh I forgotten, about 1947 or '48.
- BAGLEY: Is this when you were living in Laurel?
- DOWNS: Yes, you asked though about the bell tower. When my grandmother, well, my grandmother had financial problems on the plantation, and finally when it was necessary that she give up the place, they had handled their business, my grandmother and aunt, in such a way that my aunt's land was not incumbent, to the same extent, at least, as my grandmother's land was. Of course, they were adjacent properties, all originally part of the same. And so they put the belfry on skids, and hooked up the mules, or the tractor, I don't know which, and slid the belfry from my grandmother's land over onto my aunt's land so that the old bell tower would still remain in the family. Since then well, in the late '30's, some several years after my grandmother lost the place, my aunt sold what she had, and I assume the bell tower went with it.
- BAGLEY: Now what has been the fate of all these family papers, the Downs family, the Muir family? You've given copies to your son and your sister and their children, in book form.
- DOWNS: Yes, of the letters and these various letters, and have, as you know, with a few exceptions, the originals we had deposited with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History for, what, for perpetual availability.
- BAGLEY: Well, I've found it's one of the most fascinating group of family papers. Could there possibly be more papers, family papers?
- DOWNS: Yes, on the other side of my family, my mother's side, we have a perfusion of information, most of it in more conventional, statistical, chart type approach to genealogy. The forbearers on that side of the family are at least as illustrious as those on my father's side, but we lacked the abundance of letters and papers to reflect the intimate day to day life, but there's an exception in that line. We have a group of about 40 letters, written 1838 to 1853, by and to my maternal grandmother's mother. She was Sally Frye Winston and other well, contemporary members of her family.
- BAGLEY: Well, where were these written?
- DOWNS: They were written, generally, in Kentucky, around Danville and generally that area. Eventually, I have not had a time yet to work with these, but eventually, I hope to put copies of these in booklet form, you know, for our progeny and to deposit the originals with the Department of Archives and History. Of course, I've already done, with the Downs papers, as I've explained, I've typed them, I have photo copies with them and put them together and distributed copies to my son and to my sister and her children

in order to encourage that interest in our family history and to facilitate their learning about their history. And most of the originals, as you know, we have put at the Department of Archives and History to ensure safe keeping, item for item. My sister and I believe that through this process of providing our children and grandchildren with well-organized and easily read copies of the material, you know, our family data, and by placing the original documents for attention at the Department of Archives, in doing this, we're doing the most we can to perpetuate our family's pride in our family history.

BAGLEY: Well, you're certainly to be commended for that and I appreciate you telling us about these papers and the type of material that they contain. We haven't talked much about the contemporary things such as who are you married to? You've mentioned your son. We haven't got much information on say, the present Downs' generation.

DOWNS: No, well, we aren't quite history yet. I married Roseman (sp?) Myrick. We both grew up in Columbus, attended high school there. Of course, I went off to college, and she attended MSCW. She didn't graduate, but, 'cause we decided we wanted to get married. But we've had very interesting and happy times.

BAGLEY: And you've lived in Brazil?

DOWNS: Yes, I was on loan while I worked for the Air Force as a civilian in electronics and I was on loan for a year, actually, a little more than a year, from a United States Air Force to a Brazilian Air Force and took a team of military and civilian contracting personnel down to establish an 87 (inaudible) training program for the Brazilian Air Force. This, as you can see, the Atlantic is a big piece of water, and the United States felt it could well afford to provide some help to a nation that was willing to assist in the patrol of well aimed submarine patrol of the waters down there. Incidentally, the school that we established back in 1960 and '61 is still operating 'cause we were able, this was a great experience for us.

BAGLEY: Were you in World War II?

DOWNS: Yes, I was Navy in World War II. And of course, after I was released from active duty, at 30 46, I retained reserve status and was active in the reserve for more than 20 years and retired from the Navy and I'm real proud of that association. It was a great experience. The people I was with were the best.

BAGLEY: I think for some closing remarks, I would like to ask you, back to your family papers you donated to the Archives, do you have any favorites in that collection? Any favorite letter or incident? One that stands out the most?

DOWNS: Well, I do have some. Most of my favorites, I have asked the Department to

restore and return the original to me and so I actually have my favorites. The favorites are the ones that show the ancestor's sense of humor, their personality, their ideals, those kinds of things. For some reason, I felt that I would like sometime to sit with my grandchildren and read the original, and let them hold the original and sense the personality that is expressed in it themselves.

BAGLEY: Such as?

DOWNS: My great-grandfather, James Robinson Downs, who married Leti Vick, on his 21st, the day after his 21st birthday, he wrote his parents, and he was just out of, well he was at Princeton at the time, Princeton University, on a little excursion from there, and he wrote that he was, he had been so busy the day before, but he had intended to write them a sort of declaration of independence on his 21st birthday, and he went on in that vein, that he was now a man and so the page, I mean the letter was maybe two or three pages long, but he (inaudible) ended it up, your loving 21 year old son, which, I don't know, it was full of humor and just human interest.

BAGLEY: Was this the letter written from Louisville, Kentucky?

DOWNS: May have been.

BAGLEY: The one where he mentions the Worthington family?

DOWNS: I believe it, well it was in that series of letters. There were two or three letters that he wrote while on this trip. Actually, his brother, and an uncle and aunt, and I believe were from Clinton, Robinson was their name; it was his mother's brother and sister-in-law that they were with.

BAGLEY: Well, I appreciate this interview which will be on file at the Department of Archives and History. Again, I would like to know exactly where we are in Jackson County.

DOWNS: We at what we call a fishing camp, Poticaw, and recently, well, we've been here some about seven years now, I had a place here and until the year before last we were leasing. But the year before last the owner decided to sell, so we have bought our lot on the bayou and enjoy spending, having a good part of our time up here in our cabin.

BAGLEY: But where about? So many miles from where?

DOWNS: Oh, we're about six miles east, or southeast, of Vancleave on Highway 57, and about 10 or 12 miles north of Ocean Springs.

BAGLEY: Well, it certainly is a very beautiful and relaxing place. Thank you.

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