

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Adelaide Cromwell, Class of 1940*

Interviewed by  
Hana Sarfan, Class of 2016

May 23, 2015

## **Abstract**

Adelaide Cromwell recounts the influence her aunt, Otelia Cromwell, had on her decision to attend Smith, and her acceptance into the Smith community as one of four admitted African American students at the college. She discusses social and academic life on campus at the time and the lasting friendships that developed. Cromwell recounts her interest in sociology and how her education at Smith benefited her post-Smith career. She discusses career milestones; establishing an African American studies program at Boston University being the first African American woman to teach at Hunter College and later at Smith. Cromwell offers her insight as to how to college has evolved, socially and politically, citing the admission of transwomen as proof of progress.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Sarah Wentworth.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Shanna Freeman, Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Cromwell, Adelaide. Interview by Hana Sarfan. Video recording, May 23, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Adelaide Cromwell, interview by Hana Sarfan, transcript of video recording, May 23, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Cromwell, Adelaide. Interview by Hana Sarfan. Transcript of video recording, May 23, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Adelaide Cromwell, interview by Hana Sarfan, transcript of video recording, May 23, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

Alumnae Oral History Project  
Sophia Smith Collection  
Smith College  
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 23, 2015, with:

ADELAIDE CROMWELL  
Northampton, MA

by: HANNA SARFAN

SARFAN: OK. This is Hanna Sarfan. I'm conducting an interview with Adelaide Cromwell, class of 1940. It's May 23, 2015, and we're here with the Smith College Alumni Oral History Project. And I really want to thank you for participating, Adelaide. We really appreciate it.

CROMWELL: Thank you for asking me.

SARFAN: So, we're going to start with talking about your recollections of your time as a student here. And then we'll go on and talk some — also about all your many accomplishments after life at Smith. If you're interested in talking about those as well. Um, so let's start with, what was it like for you choosing to attend Smith College as a student?

CROMWELL: What was it like for me to what? Attend?

SARFAN: Like, how did you choose to attend Smith?

CROMWELL: Oh, that's an easy question to answer. My Aunt Otelia [Cromwell] saw to it that I came to Smith. Otelia, she was going to say that there was no other choice. But fortunately, I got in. I didn't apply anywhere else. And if I hadn't gotten it, I guess they'd have trotted me off to some school for preparation. But I didn't have to do that. And I came when I was 16.

SARFAN: Was it important to the rest of your family that you came here, or mainly just your—

CROMWELL: Ah—

SARFAN: —aunt?

CROMWELL: My father went to Dartmouth. He thought it might be a good idea. My — the rest of the family, no, I don't think they — they weren't — everybody went to college, and I had another aunt that went to the University of Michigan. But Auntie [Lee's] decision was the right one. And she was the oldest child; apparently they all listened to her anyway. And since I didn't have any strong preferences — I was saying coming over here in the car — the only other school I saw that I liked was Oberlin. I went out to visit my great aunt. And I — it's a nice — Oberlin's a nice town, it's a nice atmosphere. And they had boys. I wasn't so much on coming to an all girls' school. But it wasn't like that, it wasn't prissy, you know. It wasn't — I won't name some of the schools that it might have been like. It was — there were enough boys here to make it fun. Boys would come from Amherst, and Yale, and Dartmouth. So you did your work during the week and play during the weekend. I was never sorry about the choice.

SARFAN: How did you feel about Smith when you first came here, like in your first few months?

CROMWELL: I had nothing to compare it with. I mean, it was — people were nice to me. I had the — I always tell this story, so it might as well go in the archives. When I arrived at Morrow House, where I spent my four years, uh, I guess— I don't where the youngest students were, or those I saw. But apparently they were planning to have a party, you know. And I don't remember anybody mentioning it to me. But you know how you hear things. And I heard something that led me to believe that the students were gathering downstairs. And I went to my room. I sat there. And I said, "I'm going to sit here until somebody comes for me." And not that anybody had been rude to me, (inaudible). And I sat there, they started the party.

And finally one girl, who was a senior, came up and knocked on my door, and said, "Would you come down?" I said, "Yes." And that's the only time that I would ever have to be asked anywhere. I was already there, most places. But I think there may have been some confusion. There were no other black students there. And maybe some of the other girls hadn't ever been in school with a black student. I had not been in a school with a white student, so that makes it equal. But, uh, I just said, I— some people might've disagreed with me, and would've said, "Well, why did you go down?" But I'm not going where I'm not wanted. Unless I have to fight for it initially. That's a different thing, but if people don't want to socialize with you, you don't want to socialize with them. But I had no reason to think that they didn't.

Only reason why I tell this story is that I— someone had to come up, and she was a senior. And I guess maybe she thought, That poor little girl upstairs. Get her out. But I— that's the only thing I can say, the whole time I was ever at Smith, that I had any question — that anybody

had any question — about me. Although I do write in that little book that I wrote on my Aunt Otelia, that um, one of the student's mother came by, and saw me going to the john or something, and said to the housemother, "Is that little girl going to use the same bathroom as my daughter?" And the housemother said, "If you're daughter's going to stay at Smith College, it is." And she was a very nice housemother, her name was Mrs. Amy. But I didn't know that — that conversation, I didn't hear. And the mother — I remember the daughter; she wasn't very much to write home about. But she finished college; I don't know what happened to her. But I had heard that was said. But other than that, I never had an anecdote to — to report that I ever thought about, uh— People are always wanting to hear these things, surely you have a lot of them. But I don't.

I — my father was a great bridge player. One — a man who won prizes playing bridge. Mother didn't like bridge, and I didn't like it, and didn't do it. Therefore, I was never sitting at the table in the smoking room where the girls were playing cards. No, I liked to dance. And we had a record player. And so while the other girls were playing cards, I'd find some girl who had enough rhythm to follow me, to dance. And we did a lot of dancing in that little — Popular dance records were just coming out. The girls were buying — we had a lot of fun spending our time on the dance floor when we were in the house. And, uh, some of the girls were very good dancers. And some just had hopes. But that's just to say how one spends one's time. How you spend your leisure. And I say, I didn't play my — spare time behind the card table, much to my father's annoyance. And — but he didn't know I did this dancing. But I used to do it. It was a great — put it this way, I think that wherever you go, you have to find something that bridges a gap in leisure time. Wherever you work, you got to find some kind of leisure time activity that relates to your work — fellow workers. If you don't, you don't get along. You don't belong. And I did it on the dance floor. And talking, I don't mean we — but I just say, I should've played bridge. I just didn't like it. I never really would take to it. And Daddy didn't — he didn't insist. I think he knew it would be a hopeless cause, anyhow. So I just danced away to the next year. (laughter)

And it — I've tried thinking of some other leisure time act — 'Because we studied a lot, the girls who were (there?). Jointly and separately. And, uh, I guess I assume — I guess this is true now — it was true then, in my day. You become attached to some professor, or some professor becomes attached to you. And this goes beyond the classroom. And I was very fond of a — a professor of sociology named Gladys (Bryson?). She was very fond of me. So she made a big difference. Excuse me, does anybody have any water? [drinks] Thank you. She thought what I said was funny, a lot. She was very helpful. And had a lot to do with my success at Smith. I was also fond of Mr. (Hankins?), who was head of the sociology department. Very soon — I

mention this because very soon, I established relationships with them outside of the classroom. And then Mr. (Parshly?), who was in zoology. So I think those three people, uh, helped me in my adjust— Not that I had to be adjusted, but the teachers I liked best when I was here.

I remember another teacher was — she was young, I think she was just doing her doctorate. Dorothy [Fosdick]. Her father was a well-known minister in New York. She had a sociology class, and I used to always get a lot of fun out of watching her. She always looked at me to find out what was right or wrong. I was almost the same age she was, I guess. But — we didn't — we were friends, but not like the other three that I mentioned. But my — my early — my years at Smith were always good years. I wasn't a brainstorm, I mean, I didn't study, I wasn't a bookworm at all. I did my homework. But, uh, I was here to enjoy myself as well as to learn. And I did.

And I don't have any exciting things to tell. There were a few other black girls at Smith when I was here, four of them. And one of them I knew before I came here. She went to high school with me; she was a year ahead of me. Very brilliant girl, mathematics. Wasn't particularly attractive, but very smart. And the other girl was, uh, very attractive. Smart enough. And I laugh — not that you want to hear these aside parts — but you have — you — it's one thing if you don't have any other students of your — And then if there are a few, it's more important — interesting how you get along with those few. If there are none at all, then, you know, you just take the world as it is. But, uh, I got along well with them. But I have different stories about different ones. One girl, who (fancied being a?) doctor, became a doctor. Very arrogant, from New York. And then a lot of times, the northern Negroes thought that those of us from the South were not quite bright. And uh, this child would just speak to me when she wanted to. I tried to be friendly to her, but she didn't seem to want any friends.

But one day I was in my room doing my honors thesis, and a knock came on the door. And this girl, who had hardly wanted to speak up until that time, said, "Hello, Addy. I understand you're going to the Dartmouth carnival." I said, "I am." "I'd like to go to the carnival too." I said, "You would? That's interesting. With whom had you planned to go?" "Well, I — there must be some boy up there who I could go—" I said, "I don't know who it would be, because so-and-so is (inaudible) way. Two has a girlfriend. And three is short." He was tall — he was tall. "Oh, I wouldn't mind," said she to me. I said, "But he might mind." So needless to say, she didn't go to Dartmouth carnival." (laughter)

Another girl, who was very smart, and (inaudible) — she lived in (Gillette?) House — And I — I guess another one of the black girls, we were visiting her. And someone — a maid or somebody came upstairs, and said that a lot of boys — there are some boys downstairs to see you. And so the girl whose house it was went downstairs — tell those boys to get out of here. Well I say that, because I think that was

one of the problems if you were black in the dormitories. When the boys come in, it looks a little different. It — if you haven't really reached the point of wanting to get along with them. And — them coming here, the boys, seemed to indicate that there was too much socializing. And the guys didn't — they were — their feelings were hurt, and they came over from Amherst. But they didn't know that this would be a problem. But I remember it. It never happened — that day — again. She didn't go with the boys — there were no boyfriends — but they wanted to socialize.

While the fellows that I knew, from Dartmouth and Amherst, they were old friends and they got along very well. I — I think that's a — I mean, not that it's a profound statement to make — But when you assess the integration or the happiness of any students from the wrong side of town, or those who come from another race or country, there are those little subtle things that give you a measure of the real clarity of opinion. Even if the children may be getting along well academically, doing well. Because you can't stop that (if they're brilliant?). But where these points where they don't get along are whether they mingle. And I just — I just remember that incident that happened in Gillette House. And when I came back to teach, ironically I was faculty resident at Gillette House. But it's — you know, the way the house is built. It's kind of — way the — it's not bright, like in the (Payton?). And I don't know if this girl just got upset about it, but I — I'm running on.

But I don't have any exciting stories to tell. You ask me questions. I'll tell them to you. But my memories of the four years — what I'm trying to say — in summary, were very good. My professors were always fair to me, helped me. And my — I made good friends. Matter of fact, I tended to want to bring my godchild with me, who is the daughter of one of my best friends who has passed years ago. She's a — she's at Harvard Medical School. But she was away. She still comes to see me. I had a birthday party and she was there. She's just been very friendly with me, and my son. And they — that's one of my close friends. Another one lives in — in, uh, Florida. And she was at the last reunion. She doesn't — she doesn't dislike — she's not academic, for one thing. She teaches and does — she teaches elementary school. Her father was a businessman. But when we were at college, she was very popular with their — [her brother was]— with a big, popular football player at Cornell. So she had an inroad with the girls. And if he would ever — I don't know if he ever came to Smith while we were there. But he was maybe going when her older sister was [at Smith].

Then I had a third — third, uh, good friend, who I don't think is very well. But a mutual friend of ours is black. Now and she came up to me and we chatted. But Tina is — she's not — having it — well she always was strange. But I mean, she's not happy. And you know, that's the — if you don't already know it, when you get older, if you're not happy or contented, you get more unhappy. And you make people miserable around you. So if you can stay positive — and this particular

friend of mine didn't stay positive. And it's too bad, because she has — her mind is OK. But she was strange as an undergraduate, still is. And it shows.

SARFAN: Um, OK. And I know you majored in Sociology. Can you tell me a little bit about what that was like, and your other academic interests?

CROMWELL: Well I've been doing sociology so long; it's hard to know when I started. Uh, and I said I — because we didn't have sociology — it was a new subject then. And people were beginning to discuss issues objectively, that people weren't able to discuss during Auntie [Lee's] a time at Smith. They might come out in some literary book, but nobody was writing on these things. And I just — because — I always have been interested in people, as a child. And growing up in Washington, when things were beginning to change, and coming from a household of intellectuals, who discussed issues, that — But when I came to college, that would be the course that I was interested in. But that course is like that.

But I guess the first course I took was — what was Sociology 26, I think. Which Professor Hankins gave. But once I found it, I stuck with it. And much to my aunt's annoyance, I never went into literature. And (Miss Dunn?) was here. And Miss (Chase?) was here. They were lions on the campus. And Aunt Lee said, "I can't imagine your being at Smith College and not taking a course with blah blah blah." Well I didn't want to take that course with blah blah blah. But I think I would've been better off if I had. I would've been a broader person. But once you find your niche, I — you stick with it. Now I took zoology and I got interested in genetics. And, uh, I — I don't know how to say this. I guess as a small younger, and even an adult woman, and travelling, you see something. You gravitate towards it, and you want to understand it more. And that's the way I was with heredity.

And, as a matter of fact, I guess we were asked to do a paper. And I don't know how I settled on this particular topic, but I was interested in how people had inherited traits. And Mr. Parshly must've said something that triggered my mind off. But needless to say, I — you have seen people who have the white forelock through their hair. You ever seen — you ever notice it? They have maybe black, but there's a streak. And, uh, I don't know why — he must've said something about it, but I had some cousins who had it. I know at least in two generations. So I thought, well I'll do my paper on it. When the time came to do the paper, I never liked to do the same old subject. So I said, "I'll trace the heredity." And I did. And it was (poliosis?). And Professor Parshly liked it so well, he sent to the Journal of Heredity, and they published it. And of course, I felt very important for a brief time. (laughter) He laughed because after it came out, I got a couple of letters. People



thought it was from a faculty. The letters were written “Professor Cromwell.” And I — they ordered (reprints?).

But I — it’s gone through several generations, and I — some cousins have had little babies, and you see the little baby with just a (forelock?) right there. But others — like spotting in animals. Same kind of genetic trait. Sociology — it didn’t take me into zoology. But it — but that was how effective — the racial problem, I felt that was good in that respect. Uh, I did papers on groups of adolescents in Washington. I — I guess what I’m trying to say is, sociology permitted me to take every subject, aspect of it, back to me. In some way. It didn’t belong over there. And I did that all the way through college, and then went to graduate school. Things that happened in the college that I carried on in graduate school, which I carry on to adult. But in my younger days, we didn’t talk too much about Africa. We didn’t know much about Africa. Now my grandfather’s generation, they were interested in Africa. But my generation, sociology, we were interested in this country’s problems, here. But when I came to college, I found the professors talking about Africa. And when I left here, I got a scholarship to go to the University of Pennsylvania, where I started my master’s. Now they — fortunately, I don’t remember the history — but they had some scholars that were interested in Africa. And African students were beginning to come over and study. And I took one big course in Africa, and, um, continued. And had a chance to meet [Kwame Nkrumah], a name you may have — does his name mean anything to you?

SARFAN: No.

CROMWELL: It’s amazing, the things you — Well, he was one of the first of the new African leaders. He was on the Gold Coast, in Ghana. And he was organizing and speaking out against the British and colonialism. And became very important. But he was at Penn while I was there, took a class with me. So that sort of made my interest in Africa more exciting. And uh, I— I guess I kept that interest, and still do. Toured all the — been to Africa several times. But I was not so interested in going on and getting my PhD. And so I thought after I finished Penn, I said, “Well I’d like to go to the School of Social Work.” But I didn’t want to be a namby–pamby social worker. So at that time — it’s still true — they’re one of the — Of course, Pennsylvania had itself a very good school of social work. But (Bryn Mawr?) had a School of Social Work which was more academic than professional. It didn’t give a PhD; they gave a two–year certificate. And somebody came to me in class and said, “Do you want to go to a school of social work? Why don’t you try Bryn Mawr?” I went out to Bryn Mawr, and took their program for two years. And had a very interesting life in Philadelphia, around — I’m still keeping with sociology. With sociology now, and more practical things like social work.

And I came to Boston on a blind date. It was a big mistake. (laughs) Met the man I was to marry. And stayed in (inaudible). So then I went to Radcliffe, because I was there. And went back to the strait sociology — social relations, they called it then. I say all this to say — it's a little tedious. I can't make it too exciting. But it's interesting how one's career moves from one thing to another. Some people are very focused on the same thing. I'm gonna be a doctor. I'm gonna be a mechanic. Or I'm gonna be whatever. And they stay right on that track. Other people don't even go anywhere, they just scatter all over. But as I look on my career, it never deviated, but it was — spread out, and I have had a very interesting life because of that. Various things I have done. But I wanted to — I knew what I wanted to do, but I was open to change. And uh, I think it's — was not a bad idea. Now, I don't know that I can say anything that's more enlightening.

Women were — in graduate school, we — See, a generation or two before me, women may not have been accepted in these graduate schools. But that was not my problem. There were enough women who wanted to be in graduate — because two of the schools were women — Bryn Mawr and of course Smith. But I didn't find any prejudice against women. On the contrary, we were welcomed in. And you got scholarships or teaching fellowships. So in my own history, I said — you know, I taught at Smith for awhile, and I taught at Hunter. So uh, I can speak from my own experience that I was able to get — do as much as I had the gumption to do, or the dedication to do. And I never stopped — doing — adding on to this, until I finished. And then I finished, and of course I've been doing my own writing since then. But I — like some people take a couple years off, or take a trip, or what have you. But I never stopped. Because I was — and I don't think that was bad or necessarily very good either way. But it worked for me. And uh, did you ask me something else, that I didn't—

SARFAN: Yeah. Oh, uh, can I? Or, I think you answered my question.

CROMWELL: OK, do you have another one? (laughs)

SARFAN: So you talked a little bit about returning to Smith as a teacher. Can you tell me more about that? And what was it like? You were the first African-American instructor. Did that have an impact, or, not so much?

CROMWELL: Well, I think when I — you know, I get things — in sequence wrong. I think I came to Smith to teacher after I had gone to Hunter. Lot of things (inaudible). I went to Hunter, I commuted from New York. It was just beginning to get black faculty, and I wanted the experience. So I came up and I did that. Yes, I was first. I wasn't even married then. But they had only planned to give a black person a small job — no great — didn't take you seriously. I don't think. Though I knew that, and I told

them I'd take — I'd keep the job if they would make the position more permanent, you know. So when they said it isn't — I was hoping they wouldn't, either — because I had planned to go to Boston anyhow and get married. Well I did that.

Then I was asked to come back to Smith. So I'd had that experience. Now I — it was a — Smith took me back like one of their own. And I — I lived in Gillette House, I think I may have said that. Faculty resident. The students — I worked with Miss Bryson, Professor Hankins — students took me as they found me. And I still hear from some of them. Matter of fact, one of them heard I was coming up here to get an honorary degree that I just got, and she wrote me, and said, "I hear you're going back to (Hampshire?), will you send me some pictures?" And she had invited me to come up when she had her 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary with her — you know, I think that there wasn't any reason for a student not to accept me that wasn't — that wasn't stupid. And they found me in the environment that they wanted to be in. And people — they take things as they find them, you know? And so I don't have any experiences that I can recall of either — something outstanding, exceptional, or something that was bad. The students that took my — I mean, I liked them and they seemed to like me. Oh I had one student though — she cheated. Because I found out that she cheated. (Father?) was in the military, I can see her now. I don't know what she did — some — some dumb thing. So when I — am I going fast? No, no, even — anytime. So I brought her in, and uh, faced her with it. And asked her why she did it, you know. Because she was very frightened, because if I told on her, things would've been bad. But I don't think I had but that one student, either, that I didn't know. For example, I think — I think she knew that if I reported her, she'd be punished. So in other words, you — I was employed just like anybody else was employed. I had the authority that someone else had. And the opportunity to give some compassion, which I did do, in her case. But that's the only thing I can think of. Well you know, things come back to you as you get older. Before you lose it completely. (laughs) But — when I was — I don't want to do this now. You had a chance to, um, volunteer in various agencies. I did — I never did math or languages, just sociology. So I said, took an assignment — onto assignment down on Williams — down at the People's — People's Institute. Isn't it still there?

SARFAN: Where?

CROMWELL: People's Institute? It's down in town. Northampton. It's — if you go down Main Street, what's the street the theater's on, down the — Not the theater on Main Street, but the theater across Roosevelt?

SARFAN: Oh, the Academy of Music?

CROMWELL: Hmm?

SARFAN: The Academy of Music.

CROMWELL: Maybe. The Academy. Well I think this building was on that same street. It was like a YMCA, you know. And so I said I would volunteer and teach English to immigrants. Polish. I was trying to — I was telling this story recently — I was trying to think of what his name was. But he was cute. He didn't know hardly any English at all. And I took him in hand, and he improved it very well. And matter of fact, when I came back, after I'd taught him for two years, he had moved up in his job at the Hotel Northampton. The manager — and I think he was as smart as could be — Now when I was on the (second year?), they called me to they had another student. So I said, "I will take two." And one — and — I hope one of them isn't slow, dumb. But if he is, I'll take him. But I can't have it along with the other — so I took the other one, and he really was very slow. I don't know what ever happened to him. But the first one made it up. And I can't think of this first thing. But — do they still have they program there? Can you volunteer to do things, uh—?

SARFAN: (Nina?) says yeah.

CROMWELL: You can?

GOLDMAN: Yes.

CROMWELL: In what division of the university does it come?

GOLDMAN: Um, well, we have the Community Service office—

CROMWELL: Community service that's the—

SARFAN: Oh yes, you can volunteer.

GOLDMAN: And they have a similar, like, mentorship program.

CROMWELL: Yes, and probably just tutoring also, for children.

GOLDMAN: Yes.

SARFAN: Oh yeah, there's many places to tutor.

CROMWELL: Yeah well—

SARFAN: I don't know about that specific place.

CROMWELL: It was a very — that was an interesting thing to me, because I — we could be wrong on this one, but I know — I seem to recall that Smith did not have a full-fledged program for the help. Or for — some ethnic group or the other. Bryn Mawr, being closer to the South, had both a — help, (black?). But they had a very well-grounded academic program for them to take. Serious courses. And I worked in there too, but I was interested in the differences in the way the schools treated their help. But I did that as a side activity, and enjoyed it. And I — of course the young man I talked about first, he could either be dead or — head of a big corporation. But I would just like to know how far he went. It would be (a joy?) to see him. But I did that. Um, now — anything else you want to know, other — that I didn't tell?

SARFAN: Yes. I'd like to know about when you — when you first became interested in African-American studies. And if there were ways for you to study that at Smith, at that time. Or did you find that interest later on?

CROMWELL: Well I grew up in a household where there was regular interest. My grandfather, particularly. So it wasn't — and coming out of the South, coming out where the world was segregated. You've got to be deaf, dumb, and blind not to have some awareness of the situation. Now what you want to do about it varies with you. Again, as a sociologist, understanding how the society functions — even if I hadn't been interested in Afro-American Studies, I'd probably be interested in other ethnic groups. But I was — because I knew it. And — like — did I — how should I put it? Some of the faculty were beginning to talk about race in this country. And I guess — I didn't feel the way I would've felt in other schools where it was never discussed. It was open.

Now the — one of the well-known black sociologists, he's of an earlier generation than you are, certainly. And even than I. Man by the name — excuse me — of E. Franklin (Frasier?). If you ever looked at the literature, he'd written a number of books as a professor. He started — excuse me — in Chicago. But he was then teaching at Howard University. It turned out that his professor — when he was a student — was the same man who was teaching at Smith. Professor Hankins, whom I just described. Who was at Clark University then. So I invited — because Frasier was — Hankins's student — invited Frasier. I was involved with Frasier. I asked him to come to Smith and give a couple of lectures, which he did do.

But at that time, they hadn't instituted any course. But there was an interest in that scholarship by blacks or whites. And I think that I just rode on the wave that was beginning to be discussed. There were a few professors who were susceptible to it. And students were interested. But it was done slowly. This was not the result of any help that I'm aware of — the part that I took a part in — of any fight. Some schools, they had to fight to get it there. It was — there were lectures with me, with either

Smith or even later, at Bryn Mawr — I mean, at Penn. No, I mean (BU?). I'll finally say it right. I was — I'd come to BU, and one of my friends who'd been at — a white scholar — who'd been with me at — at uh, Penn — we were there at the same time. And people were beginning to talk about Africa, and more about Africa. And we approached the department and started the program.

Also, people were getting interested where there was money. And this is about the same time that the foundations, particularly the Ford Foundation, and other foundations, were realizing that they needed to educate American people. So they were open to having grants given to universities. So if a university could get some money for it, it's interesting to start in. If there isn't any money for it, they may like it, but they postpone study of it. So I was fortunate that — that uh, Penn had some interest and money. But particularly Boston University had some. And uh, we built up first with African Studies, and the Ford Foundation. That was purely a judgment of scholars who wanted to train younger scholars. After it had been going — it was one that I participated in first. After that had been going awhile, students became more — more selective in what they accepted from their professors. And a couple students came to me, and said that courses were being taught at BU were not being taught properly. And you could go to almost any university and say that. But they said that to me. And I went to the dean, and found a receptive ear. And next thing you know, we started an Afro-American Studies program, after — both of these were graduate students. And they said they were having some problems recently. If you've seen the paper — about race at BU. But the history that I know about it — this way — first the scholars saw it, got grants from the Ford Foundation, and we went on. Second students complained, and I — to me. And I went to the proper authorities and they also were receptive.

SARFAN: That's good that they were receptive.

CROMWELL: But — yeah — it was very — it was good. And any — any school could have a different story. It was just me (asking?) who was on the faculty, what the students were doing. But our students had not gotten angry about anything. And by the time they got angry, we — and this is under my time — they had communication with the faculty. But as you know if you read the papers over the years — the students get angry — before you — You don't let them get angry. You meet them and talk about what they have concerns about, and try to address that. And then usually they'll move on. And that's what's been true with BU while I was there. And other schools that I know. Harvard, and Yale, same kind of thing. So I don't know much about what they're doing here [at Smith], but at least they haven't been in the newspapers. Like some schools have.

SARFAN: Well, I know from my research that you were in a lot of different areas of work in your career. You did many different things. Is there anything that stands out to you as something you would like the Smith community to know about?

CROMWELL: Well I've been on — I can illustrate what I've done to show you how your knowledge can help. I — I wish we get — a number of years ago, let's say 25 years ago — there was a big riot. In the (Charlestown?) prison. Which is now — the prison has now been taken down. But they had this riot, and it was a terrible place. And of course, the community got upset and got in touch with the governor. And the governor heard of it, and decided to set up a commission to look at the conditions in the prisons. And they appointed this commission; I guess there were about six or seven people. I was the only woman and the only black. And our job was to visit the prisons regularly and uh, make — to see what was happening. What the conditions were. And I — I had taken the — a course in criminology. I had some criminology as an undergraduate. But I took a course with a professor at Harvard named [Sheldon Glueck] at the law school. And so I did have a little bit more knowledge than the average person would be.

And the going in and out of the prisons, seeing the conditions as an activist — rather than as a work — custodian — a worker — was very informative. How they lived. How they were treated. And uh, what could be done about it. I always tell this sort of story about that, because — Massachusetts had employed a man by the name of (Oswald?) — I forget his first name — to be our commissioner of corrections. And he hadn't been there very long, very pleasant gentleman, as I recall would go — and then he decided, I guess, for more money, I don't know what — to go to New York. To take a similar job. And he hadn't been in New York very long before all hell broke out in New York. The famous Attica riots, if you know anything about that. So I — I always — I never saw him again, but I thought — Mr. Oswald thought he wished he'd never left Massachusetts. But that facet of — see, the penal system — going in and out of the prisons — was very informative to me. Not only for a teacher, if you help on policy things. That's one thing I did. I guess I served on that — well, the commission only served about six years.

Now the last 15 or 18 years, I've been working with a — department of— what do we call it? Professor (Galvin?) is the — Galvin is the secretary. It oversees all of the — all of the [social] agencies in the state of Massachusetts. And they come before this commission. It's made up of representatives of several agencies to approve for money. To get credentials in certain historical aspects of the — now I wouldn't say that you have to be a sociologist. People who sit on that come from various — but it's a matter of what you can take from the classroom or the library out to the real world. What is — who's handling this agency? And what's — what's — can it be given greater status? More money?

Or can't — there's power in this. So I mean, I've been doing — in fact, I just retired from that this year. I told them, I thought I was getting too old and I've got other things to do. And I would like to resign. So I'm going to do that this year. But it's a very interesting bit of practical work. And all the people who are on it work with agencies. Not all are social workers, not all are sociologists. But that discipline helps you, I feel, to do that job. So I've done that.

Then I spent a lot of time with — should I say — how — As Africa began to awaken, and people began to be — have more power. And even more academically, respectable — no, I shouldn't say respectable. More academically sophisticated. You've got these organizations starting, and one is called the American Society of African Culture which I joined. Was asked to join, when they first started. And it was very exciting. It was like a — if you belonged to the American Sociological Society, or the American Historical Society, but this is just on Africa. So they sent people to Africa, and Africans came over to us. And there was a lot of learning there. And I was on that — I guess it's — I don't know if it's still going or not.

I must say that it was a branch I was — the Society of African Culture — which was started by a man named [Alioune Diop], who was the first activist. I don't think he was the first professional scholar, but I forgot. Anyway, he wanted to have this tie with us. So we worked very well with him. Now in the period — this would be, I guess, in the '70s or '80s — a lot of talk about America through the State Department, influencing — trying to infiltrate activist groups. And it — we — this organization was accused of being an arm of the State Department. And the thing about that that was interesting — there may have been some scholars who worked with it, who were — knew that. But there were also scholars who weren't a part of that. But I — I learned a lot. And they — because we had exciting conferences. Or should I say — they've been written about — there are books written about the organization. And I don't think anybody still knows. But I do know that there was money to do things then, but stopped coming. And so probably, the source was the State Department. But you — the thing that I learned from it — if it's true, you're not supposed to see it. Because it's supposed to be covert. And I felt — I was one of those who worked with this group for a number of years, heard these accusations. It may have been true of some people, but it wasn't true for me. And some others. So you may go out into the real world and find that's — (inaudible) like that. Depending on your area. Now would be more in the sciences. But what you need to know. But what the government needs to have you know — or another government wants you to know. But the — that was an important thing for me for several years. I — I met some very interesting people there. And I tried — I think I learned a lot.



Now let's see. Criminology, Africa, social aid. Oh, this is the last thing. Uh, when I was doing my dissertation, I got involved with Boston as a community. I was doing it on the — it was about the stratification — class stratification. And I was always interested in those black people who had made it. Who were intelligent, and made a living. Plenty of those at the bottom — and they have to be looked at. But as I used to say, if there's a bottom, there's a middle. If there's a middle, there's an upper. Otherwise the terms don't count. So I was interested in the upper — so-called upper class. Stratifications in Boston. And the Boston black community is an old community. And I was looking at certain aspects of it, and I — from that, I did several projects. But this is one that I will comment on at length. I always — I was never interested in the sororities or that sort of thing. But I was interested in groups of people. And so — but 1975 or before, a group of women with me had belonged to one of these big social clubs that the black community has many of. But we didn't feel that was the way that we wanted to use our time. Wanted to be more useful.

So I had found out lots of things in doing my research, about the old Boston community, that I thought this group of women — they were all professionals, this was an activity they were doing on their own — should be interested in. And so what we started off doing is putting — how do I put it — do I say — if there weren't a marker on a house that George Washington slept there, you'd never know George Washington slept there. The house wouldn't tell you that. You'd have to do the research on that. So with that mentality, I knew lots of — several black people — men and women of distinction — had lived in a certain section of Boston, in the north end, back of Beacon Hill. And they no longer lived there. And people would not know, either them or that was their home.

So we started on this project of identifying homes and putting a marker on them. And that was not easy. You had to do the — research on it; you had to get the people to let you do it. And then of course you had to pay for it. And you had to go before the government and get the government — the uh, the historical act — I forget the committee we went to — to have — they would agree that you could put those there. And we've been doing that — and we put plaques on about 12 houses there. And as I say, it's volunteer. But I know the history, and some of the other women are sophisticated about the history.

Even though it's a — a volunteer project, this last year, one girl — one woman came to me, who was in our club, who said, "I have found out something interesting that I'd like to have documented, publicly." Well she had found out — she was interested in — she was a retired professor of education at AU [American University?]. She was interested in how blacks were educating their children; as far back as she could go. And so she went back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. And she was working with someone — well no, she ran into somebody — you know

when you go to archives, you never know whom you're going to meet. And she met someone who was doing the same thing, and they found out that there was this black woman who lived in Boston in the 17<sup>th</sup> century who had owned property. Had a house, and had deeds and all to prove it. And the house had located — was located on what they call the Rose Kennedy Thruway. If you don't know Boston, it's a park that they have set up, long park that runs through the city. And right in one of those spots there was where this woman whose name was [Zipporah Atkins] had her house. And we documented.

So we went to the — to the people who — government and said, "We would like to put a plaque on that park. Because we know that Zipporah lived there." And it was so — we had the money to do it. They were willing to do it. And so we got ourselves together, and uh, I had a lot of fun. Because a lot of people I know who go to church a lot, you know, "You know Zipporah? You know who she was?" "Uh, I don't — well, her name sounds familiar, Adelaide." I only found one person I talked to who knew who Zipporah was. And that was a neighbor of mine who is Jewish. And he had had a good education, I guess, in the Bible. And he knew who Zipporah — the real Zipporah, not this woman. She was named for some after — after the Biblical Zipporah. Now who was Zipporah? Zipporah was one of Moses's wives. So after we got that all straight (laughs) we got this affair together. Big ceremony. The governor came. And this has a spinoff to it.

The governor came over to me — I was sitting down — I didn't know — realize this. But he greeted me. The next day, the girl — the woman who is a lady friend of my son's — said to his mother, "Isn't that Adelaide?" "Well, who's that kneeling before her?" (laughter) Well it turned out the governor had knelt — I wasn't even aware of it. You know I was greeting him, but he was kneeling before me. And it came out in *The Globe*. It was funny — a lot of people laughed about it. But the point I liked about it was that we were working on another project and I brought it to the attention of the governor. And he had — apparently was going to be pleasant about it, but he was busy — and I guess stood in a file behind many other things. But when he — and I had talked to him that day about — but when he saw that picture, I guess he said, "I haven't done that project." So it — what is that project? I discovered — I didn't know it before, shall we put it that way? That there was training ground for soldiers in the Civil War in (Reedville?), not far from Boston. And Northern — three Northern black troops were trained right in that program. Out of the 54<sup>th</sup>, 55<sup>th</sup>, and the 5<sup>th</sup> Calvary. And white troops too, but if you went there, it just looked like a playground. Not very well done. Nothing historically relevant about it. I said, "We've gotta do something about this."

So I started out with these women working on this, and was trying to get money from the governor. Now we had a contest first, to get a (inaudible). This had been going on about 18 years, 17, 18 years.

And now I'm finishing up what I'm telling to you (laughs). We, uh, after the governor saw that picture, he said, "I guess I will work on Adelaide's project — or Adelaide Cromwell's project." And he had just given an announcement to six playgrounds to get money on a matching grant. In other words, the group would go to him and you'd try to get \$10,000 from him, you've got to put up \$10,000. Our little group he had paid no attention to, until after this — bowing and kissing. He didn't kiss and bow, anyhow. And so — then he gave half a million dollars, I think. Not even on a matching grant. Now I'm very excited about this. We're working on it now, we're having meetings. I think it's good for the governor; it's good for his legacy. It's good for history, people didn't know right in that area. There was a small marker on it, a little, um, cannon. But you would never know its historical significance until — we — our design, which we're having implemented. It ought to be ready — Lord willing as they say — by September.

But I say that if I were still teaching — if I had a student interested — I'd say, I want you to write up this project. Take this idea up that we saw this, and what we had to go through to get this to reality. And that's again — nobody got any grade for it. But I think all the women who are interested and who work with it have had some social studies in college, or in graduate school. That shows you how you can make change, even when you don't know it. Nobody's getting any money for this, but it'll make a difference in the history of Boston.

SARFAN: Yeah. I'll have to go look at it.

CROMWELL: When it comes, I'll let you — when it gets up, yeah. It's — I'm very excited about it. And I think everybody — we're right in the middle of it right now, because — what the — even the — the state had to handle the money. And then announce the competition. And these various groups competed and the state chose one particular designing group. And our club has met with them. We're having a little difference of opinion about the design, but not anything important. But the state let that happen, because if we had a big issue and if they went ahead on it, a community group like ours might get up in arms. But we are potentially now on the same side of the track. And so when it's done, there'll be a — a something. Several plaques. They're talking different — it could be — there's more than one statue. And I have already seen the playground. It's different from the one — when I first got involved in it. The first time, it was just for children to play. Then as the government changed, they reworked it, but they still didn't do much with the history. Just made it a better place for children. So now we're going to try to make it a place where adults go and learn. So I'm very pleased about that.

SARFAN: Yeah. OK, um, I guess my last question is what keeps you coming back to Smith after all these years? You're always returning, and the college is continuing to learn from you. I just want to know, what is it that motivates you to do that?

CROMWELL: Well I go back to my high school, too. (laughs) I think if you have had a warm learning experience, and you've been through it, if it's possible — for some people, I guess, they say — I don't think anybody should turn their backs — Or the alumni associations, try to make it — stick with it anyway. But with me, as I've discussed my career, thrown right out of it — it would have to breaking that career if I didn't come back to Smith. It would mean that I was turning my back on part of my own development — which I knew was part of my development. I guess some people don't feel as close to their own history as I feel about mine. You know, being aware of what came — and how — through my aunt, and through other people, it was the continuity.

But in my high school, (Dunbar?) High School, which is — maybe you've heard about it, in Washington. It's a very well-known high school for black children. And important blacks have gone there. And it hasn't been as popular as it's become recently, because they just got a new building. But the line of the people — it's — it's their (inaudible). I mean, the teachers were — at least when I was there — the teachers were well-motivated. Well-educated. And the parents were. Now that changed, because Washington has changed, but it's changing back again. And those like me have kept their love of Dunbar. And kept everything going. So it's the same thing with uh, with — with Smith. I said I guess my Aunt Lee was always fond of Smith. And my father was — loved Dartmouth. He would've — sorry I wasn't a boy. And my son wouldn't go to Dartmouth; it was too cold. So (laughs). He didn't go. But uh, anyway — he and Daddy would come up every year to go to the Dartmouth-Harvard game. Dartmouth. It was just in the — if you had a — I guess it depends on your family and also where you live. If you move where it's inconvenient. If I were living in, oh, I don't know, even in California. Even — but living — (inaudible) at Smith and send a few sentences to it. But I wouldn't be able to come back to it. And uh, watch it grow into the presidents — all the presidents (laughs) — but I mean — I've seen President (Neilson?) of course. Mrs. (Morrow?) and the rest of them. So you just — it — also, you enter institutional growth. And uh, how Smith has changed institutionally. I didn't hear any talk about what it was going to do about — what's the word I want to say? Boys who want to become girls and girls who want to become boys?

SARFAN: Oh, transgender.

CROMWELL: Transgender. How it's going to happen. Has the policy been made?

SARFAN: Yes, they are now going to admit transgender women.

CROMWELL: I think that's right. Well, it's not as easily done as said. I don't think. I think I wrote them — the president — I'm always writing somebody some kind of letter or something. But my hope was that all the women's colleges would get together, and five of them — however many, six — and come up with a unified policy. That would seem to make sense. But of course that's taking into advantage — lots of people have certain special interests, or they're just not going to be — or else, that year you get on the board this crackpot. And in a — you don't have a strong, open-minded person to push something through. But as a scholar, and trying to look at social change in a respectable way, credibly way, I think it should be — would be nice if it could be something that they could all get together on. Bryn Mawr, and Mount Holyoke, and the rest of them. But uh, I'm not running the colleges. So I don't know. But uh, I — I — it's going to happen, I think. But it won't be easy. You know. I never did any serious study of that problem. It isn't a problem — that situation. But uh, because it would — it would be interesting to do how children do turn out all the things of things that they say. This one has a happier marriage, or that's a real problem, looking at it. And I haven't heard any lecture on it. I'm sure there are lots. I only heard what they say on the television or something. But the colleges have to face it, and I just think it would make nicer — things if they could all do it together.

SARFAN: Yes. Thank you so much. Unfortunately, we're out of time.

CROMWELL: OK. Well thank—

SARFAN: That was great—

CROMWELL: — you.

SARFAN: — I really appreciate it.

CROMWELL: Well, I hope you all have found something that you—

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Shanna Freeman, June 2015.*