Interviewee: Francis J. Gill
Interviewer: Theresa Gill-Walker
Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

TG: My name is Theresa Gill-Walker and I am here today with my mother, Francis J. Gill to do some oral history that will go into the archives of Gainsboro Library in Roanoke, Virginia. Mom, just a couple of questions to get the formalities out of the way. When and where were you born?
FG: I was born in Fairfield, Virginia, the 3rd of September, 1927.
TG: Its hard to let that part go, huh? (both laughing) Fairfield, Virginia, which is approximately an hour from Roanoke, right?
FG: Yes.
TG: Where did you grow up?
FG: I grew up in Covington, Virgnia.
TG: Which is another hour a different way.
FG: Yeah. Going a different way.
TG: Did you have any brothers or sisters?
FG: No.
TG: Were your parents from Fairfield as well?
FG: Both of them were from Fairfield, Virginia.
TG: You grew up in a home?
FG: Yes.
TG: Did your family have gardens and all that?
FG: My father had – yeah, we had gardens.
TG: And apple trees.
FG: Yeah.
TG: Yeah, love the apple tree. When you were growing up, what type of activities did you participate in?
FG: Not many because I was not, as you would say, a sociable child. (Interviewer laughing) But I did a lot of drama. I really did a lot of drama.
TG: And theater which is probably where Craig gets it from.
FG: Yeah, and did a lot of reading.
TG: Weren't you a girl scout?
FG: Yep, I was a girl scout. You know, the regular things but as far as sports and stuff was concerned, I didn't go out for that too much basically because of my health which was not really that good and also because I wasn't interested in it.
TG: You were independent all the way back then?
FG: Yeah, very.
TG: Where did you go to school?
FG: I went to school at Watson. Watson was straight through school, you know, from 1st grade to the 12th grade. I went to school in Watson in Covington, Virginia.
TG: How old were you when you graduated?
FG: I was 16.
TG: Oh, so you graduated early. You were a brain, huh?
FG: I wouldn't say so.
TG: Well, you graduated 2 years early.
FG: Yeah, well -
TG: That is a brainiac even by today's standards. Graduating 2 years early. And where did you go to college?
FG: I went to college in Dixie Hospital's/Hampton Institute because we took our classes and what have

you at Hampton Institute and we're Hampton Institute Alumni.
TG: But you prefer that we call it Dixie, huh?
FG: Yes.
TG: What did you go to school for?
FG: Nursing.
TG: Now I remember you telling me when you got out of nursing, you decided you wanted to join the military.
FG: Mm mm.
TG: How old were you when you got out?
FG: I guess I must've been 19, no 20.
TG: You were 20.
FG: Mm mm.
TG: And what year was that, '46?
FG: I'm not good at years but I know I was 20.
TG: So World War II was over.
FG: Yeah. I graduated, I guess I graduated in '45 and I wasn't old enough to join the service. I had signed up for the service. I wasn't old enough to join it so I came to Roanoke and I worked at Burrell Memorial Hospital until I was 21 and I went into the service.
TG: So you lived in Roanoke and worked at Burrell Memorial Hospital for a year?
FG: I got out of school in March. We graduated in March and I went into the Army like the last of September because I was supposed to go in on the 3rd of September and I had an acute appendectomy and therefore I had to wait until I recovered from that.
TG: They gave you a lot of recovery period, more than they do now?
FG: Well, you know I was going into the service so I had to be ready for stuff. And while I was at Burrell, I worked with some doctors but the two that I really remember was Dr. Downing and Dr. Claytor.
TG: Really!
FG: Yes.
TG: Dr. Downing and Dr. Claytor.
FG: Mm mm.
TG: Well, alright Ma!
FG: Dr. Claytor was the one that did my appendectomy. I remember him talking to me when I was having a lot of pain and I remember him talking to me and then I stretched out and said, “You can go home now because my pain is gone”. And the next thing I knew, I was on the operating table. That was one of the first things I learned in nursing, after I got out of nursing, was that if the pain leaves, the appendix has burst. That was one of the first things from my – I learned a lot from my illness but that was the first thing that I learned from the illness throughout the year.
TG: Wow. Very early.
FG: Mm mm.
TG: You were a brand new nurse.
FG: Yeah.
TG: So, what was Dr. Claytor like? Was he tough?
FG: No, he wasn't.
TG: Was he nice?
FG: No, he wasn't. He was – He and Dr. Downing both, they were -
TG: There were perfectionists?
FG: Yeah. They were one of the best doctors out as far as patient and nurse relationships, they were some of the best doctors I worked for.
TG: Well, that's saying a lot 'cause you've been nursing over 60-

FG: Over 50-some years. Is it 60 years?
TG: Yes, mom. You've been nursing for over 60 years.
FG: Right.
TG: 61 years to be exact.
FG: Well, I stopped nursing -
TG: You never stop being a nurse and you still have your license.
FG: Yep.
TG: So you've been nursing for a long, long time. Now, question, you dealt with the hospital side of Gainsboro, but did you ever deal with the party side of Roanoke and Gainsboro?
FG: Not really.
TG: So you never tipped over to the "yard" as we call it or Henry Street?
FG: My connection with Henry Street is when I was still living in Covington because the theater they had – I cannot remember the name of the theater – but it had a movie and a live concert stage and what have you and we would come from Covington and go to that. And then my parents and I and some of the friends from Covington would come over to the hotel and have our meal, which the food was delicious.
TG: Really.
FG: We had – I remember Henry Street as being very -
TG: Vibrant?
FG: Right, that's the word I need because they had everything. They had music stores. They had hotels. They cleaning shops. They had barber shops. It was – Henry Street was really a thriving area.
TG: A thriving community.
FG: Right. And I must say, everything was neat. It wasn't -
TG: Run down.
FG: It wasn't just put together. All the stores, all the things and what have you -
TG: People took pride
FG: Were well -
TG: Well taken care of. They took care of their community.
FG: Right.
TG: So when you left the area and joined the military, were you nervous about being the only black around going into a field that had just approved for blacks to really come into the military and be given the proper respect after, I think it was, um, after Roosevelt – Who's after Roosevelt?
FG: I don't know but I wasn't - Because I had never been taught to be nervous about being the only one. I ended up being the only nurse working at Allegheny Hospital, the only black nurse and I don't think there was ever another black nurse working there. And, I worked at C&O Hospital in Clifton Forge and I was the only black there and it just didn't – When I was in the service, a lot of areas that - when I was in Kansas, I was the only black out in my platoon but when I was in Hawaii, there was a few blacks. One was a very good friend of mine and still a very good friend of mine but there was not a whole lot of people for me to associate with which didn't bother me because if I ran into people that were prejudiced, I felt like it was their problem, it wasn't mine. So, therefore, it didn't bother me. I addressed it. Professionally I addressed it but it didn't bother me.
TG: Wow. Now that goes back to the conversation that you and I had when we were talking about how independent and strong the women were in our family and through me going back and just sitting around thinking and listening and talking. Something I found very pertinent was you telling me how great-grandma built y'all up that way even though great-granddad was there and he was a vibrant, strong part of the family. Great-grandma seemed determined to make sure that the women had – knew their self-worth.
FG: Mm mm.
TG: And were proud of it and were strong in it.

FG: Yeah.
TG: And didn't because – She says she used to talk to y'all about that even when y'all were little.
FG: Mm mm.
TG: Sitting on the porch. But she told the men that too, didn't she? She told all y'all that didn't she?
FG: Yes, she did. She would do her work and then come out and she would tell us an awful lot of things and some of the main things really stuck with me. How to live. Why you're living the way you're living. How to pick your friends. How to recognize who was friends and who wasn't. And how to solve your problems without violence or hard feelings or what have you. And she also was telling us, regardless of what a person looks like or feels like, you speak to them. You don't have to go down where they are but you can speak to them because you never know who you have to ask for a drink of water. Like she said, "Going up, you don't know who you're going to meet coming down".
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TG: Well see, that leads right into something else that I will never forget you taught me this when I was real young. You know, you have to carry your weight, carry yourself in a certain way because you never know who you're gonna see and what walk of life and probably reiterating what grandma taught you because there was nurse that you worked with in Kansas?
FG: Oh. (chuckling) The situation. I had come home before being transferred to Kansas, Fort Riley in Kansas and here I am, new 21, I guess I was still 21. And the nurse - There was a person in the seat beside me. I had on my uniform because we had to travel in uniforms but she didn't have on a uniform or anything and we were talking and we talked about everything. And I was telling her how proud I was to be in the service and what have you. And from Covington, Virginia – I guess she got on around Richmond to Kansas. We talked about different things.
TG: Are you serious? For that long?
FG: Yeah. So, she – when I got to Kansas and got everything in line and we had this large meeting with the director – you know, the new nurses with the director.
TG: Director of nurses?
FG: Yeah. And so when I went in, the first thing I looked at – I was the only black there and the second -
TG: You were the only black, for real?
FG: In that platoon. And the next thing I looked at was the lady that had traveled with me all that time was the Director of Nurses.
TG: So that was like a 2 day ride.
FG: And she – That's why I keep telling you all, I could've been on that train, I could've been acting crazy. I could've been doing this. I could've been doing that. And who was I riding with but my boss.
TG: Your bosses boss. She was your bosses boss.
FG: Yeah.
TG: Wow, what an impression you made with her.
FG: So you never know who you're gonna have to come in contact with. You never know. See, always carry yourself the way you want to be presented.
TG: Exactly. And I have learned that from you.
FG: Mm mm.
TG: And I have tried to do that and it has come back to me and because I listened to what you said. Its something young people always need to - listen to your elders because they know what they're talking about. Were the first person in the family to go to college?
FG: No, I had my uncle, my mother's oldest brother, he went to Hampton. He fell off a roof in Hampton. That was at the time when he went to school when Hampton was being built and part of the students would pay their tuition by working and he was repairing a roof and he fell off the roof.
TG: So after great-Uncle Sam, you were the next person to go to college.
FG: I guess so.

TG: You were. Out of that big family. That was a big family. And you were the next one to go to college.
FG: Mm mm.
TG: And that next generation -
FG: There's a lot.
TG: All of us went. Whether the parents went to college or not, the kids went. That next generation. I can't help but think that, you know me, I can't help but think that the family seeing the impact of how your life was changed and bettered and how you were able to change and better the life of grandma and granddaddy through knowledge or whatever, and/or pride did have a strong reflection on our family making sure that our – that their kids follow in your footsteps. You were kinda like the leader for everybody.
FG: Well, not really.
TG: I don't mean leader as far as martyr -
FG: Because their parents had the same upbringing that my parents had.
TG: Right, but see they saw what you accomplished.
FG: Yeah.
TG: They didn't go to college but when they saw what you accomplished 'cause you went to college, they made sure that their kids went to college.
FG: Yeah, OK.
TG: That's what I'm saying is where the difference was made. Because, I don't think from your generation of people who had kids. I think all of us went to college unless we didn't want to go.
FG: Mm mm.
TG: Unless we didn't want to go or went into the military. You're talking about lots of people now but I don't think any of us hasn't gone to college and its been insisted on.
FG: Right.
TG: And, so that's an important thing to point out.
FG: Mm mm. OK.
TG: That's a very important thing to point out to show what you have done has made a difference to an entire family, extended family. I wanted to talk to you about something my son is always questioning. He's heard you give him the history of when you were living in Washington and when Martin was killed. We looked at a documentary about what was going on then but its not as poignant as you hear from someone who was actually there.
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FG: Well, I was on my way from Washington to Covington because I was working in Washington at the time. And the – I was halfway to Covington and I heard on the radio that Martin Luther King had been assassinated and it was strange because it looked like everything had definitely changed and by the time I got to Covington, everybody was talking about it. Everybody was closed in and what have you and the result – and I could see the change that it made, how people were feeling, sad, don't know where we're going from here, one of our leaders are gone. But what really hit me is when I went back to Washington to work. And going into Washington, I had to show identification in order to get into Washington and on my way to my apartment, 2 or 3 times I had to show identification. This was in the day time I had to show identification and then when I went home and I left for work that night, there were soldiers on just about every corner. There were jeeps around and from my house to the VA, I was stopped at least 4 times to show my identification. I was in uniform. It was a horrible feeling. And 14th Street which was a very prominent street in Washington and for blacks, because most of the things there were owned by blacks and stuff, it looked like a war torn -
TG: War zone.
FG: Zone. And when I get to work, I'm looking, "What in the world" and we had to have – They had to give us identification which I wasn't there and I hadn't gotten it. But they had to give us badges to

wear for at least a week to wear when we were in the street. Not only when we were driving but when we were in the street. But it gives you an idea of what these people – a very, very small idea – about what some of these people are going through when their in a war because that's what it looked like.
TG: It felt like a war.
FG: That's just what it felt like and soldiers were everywhere. Everywhere.
TG: Because people, they got so angry they destroyed their own community.
FG: They destroyed their own community.
TG: That took decades to build up. And we're still building it up.
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TG: What do you think the Civil Rights Movement and desegregation has had, what kind of impact do you think its had on the community? Not the world, just the community.
FG: I lived in a whole lot of communities, which one are you referring to?
TG: I'm talking about Roanoke. 'Cause see you dealt with Roanoke before desegregation and after.
FG: Before and then when I came back and worked there. I can't say too much about that because when I come to Roanoke with my children, I had to fight a lot of segregation that you could see and a lot that you couldn't see. A lot that was under politics, under this, under that. And you know I did a lot of fighting then because my children were in school and you know you really had to fight in order to do it. But there were just a - such a few people fighting for the rights of themselves and their children and what have you – and when I say people, I mean blacks – that it really hurt my feelings. Because there was an incident at Fleming and we were trying to get housing for some of the guys that had been involved in this incident -
TG: Are you talking about the riots?
FG: And they – we could not get the parents of the children that was involved in the incident to come out and work with us. There were very few of us. We were called concerned citizens. And then the – finally, we got to a point where we were bringing people in from Washington and in order for us to get somebody to come in from Washington so these children could get schooling, we had to have one of – at least one of the parents name and what we got – what we were finally able to get was one parent. She let us use her name, she was a single parent. She let us use her name and that was – that really hurt. We were successful in what we were trying to do but all these people in Roanoke, African-American, Negros, whatever you want to call 'em, and there were like 10 of us, at least 10 of us that they didn't – that would only work with us. So years later, we have my daughter is working to further the education of the children in school and what do we have? We still have 6 to 8 people working to get this done and other people are just not really caring. So I wanna say that it hasn't changed a lot, not in Roanoke. (sigh)
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TG: What about the Gainsboro community? You know like OK, you felt like you were out there by yourself?
FG: There were very few people.
TG: And I more than understand that.
FG: And now, we do have, we have – well we had it then but it was kinda hard to pull in these people like the Gainsboro to Melrose Library and what have you because they had their jobs and like I say, it became political. So it was hard for them to that.
TG: You're talking the people in the Gainsboro and Melrose communities were afraid to come out.
FG: Not community, no. I'm saying that the people that worked in the libraries and into things or what have you. I don't know why the people are not involved.
TG: Well the people in the libraries were involved though.
FG: I said, the people in the library, not the community.
TG: Oh.
FG: They are working at a lot of things that really work. They are. But where are your children? I'm

talking about children now. They're working at things that are working. They have improved a lot of things that have worked. The libraries, they have kids. They have all kinds of programs and they are helping the children and whatever. What I'm speaking of is when you're fighting for the schools. You're fighting that this don't happen in schools. I'm not talking about the community as a whole, I'm talking about who is fighting for our children. Maybe this is important to me. Its very important to me. But as Roanoke has changed drastically as far as the civil rights is concerned. It has changed and as I say, Henry Street was beautiful. We had everything. But once desegregation took over then we lost. We lost everything. So -
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TG: That boils down to one of my major arguments with desegregation because see we didn't want to be equal but separate but I think one of the arguments that I have that we as Africans in America have done is we have assimilated so much to other things that we didn't have access to that perhaps psychologically, we didn't have access to were better because we didn't have access to them so it was better. And we've lost a lot in our community as far as businesses go. And in losing those businesses, we've also lost -
FG: A lot of our identity.
TG: Our identity and our voice. Because if you look back, if it wasn't for the libraries in the black community, those people who do do something for the community or want to do something for the community, they find each other. At least that's from my experience. We find each other at the library. Especially Gainsboro. We have found each other and branched out to do other thing and our kids are viewing that because they hang out at the library. This is their one safe haven in the community. And they hang out at the library and then they so they're able to see us forming community activism. But it is a small few.
FG: But like I said, Roanoke has made strides, they've made great strides from the time I worked here because you went to, if you weren't admitted to most hospitals and if you were admitted, you went to the basement. So it has made an awful lot of – Burrell was the first and I guess the only black hospital that gave a lot of good care but they have branched out. They have – Roanoke has changed drastically. And going to stores and doing this, Roanoke has changed drastically. But I guess the school is the one that bothers me the most.
TG: And you feel like the community needs to get more involved in what the school system is doing.
FG: Right.
TG: Alright, I'll give you that one because you know I know. That's an argument that we always agree on. Isn't that funny? Its actually something that we agree on. And the last thing I wanted to bring up with you I guess is something that I've always looked at is that you have promoted strength as a black woman, as an African-American woman. You have made great strides. We have always gone places and did things where we were the only black family there including going on summer vacations every year from 1966 on when everybody used to say, “Why y'all going on vacation”. And we used to be, “I don't know”. And now that we're grown, we appreciate it through putting 4 girls through college, purchasing your own home and you've done that and I applaud you because you have done that, building up the strength of your black daughters as women and not tearing down black men. As a lot of single women have done that I've seen. So I commend you for that because our black brothers are necessary and important. But I don't think you realize what a major milestone - when I was growing up in Roanoke, I was the only kid I knew in Roanoke or Covington that went on vacation every year. And I'm talking from North to South, from Canada to Florida.
FG: Well, I'll tell you what.
TG: And these kids came from double parent households.
FG: I felt it – I've always felt it was important for children to know other than their community. So when we left in June for 2 weeks, we never went to the same place twice and we spent 2 weeks on the road. Like for instance, we went to Canada. We went on one side of Canada near New York and we

came out by Detroit, Michigan side. We ran around in Canada for all that length of time and we would go one way and come back the other way where we seen a lot. We went to museums. We went to this and that. I was trying my best to give you all a look at life so when you got out there, nothing would be strange to you. You would know how to handle it and what have you. And then it – This was good for us to be together for 2 weeks and not have to worry about nothing.
TG: And you did. I remember one year, I had a lot of white friends growing up in Covington and hung out with them as much or more than my black friends who were in my neighborhood. And they started calling me Uncle Tom. Oh my God, they used to tease the heck out of me. And I just played it off. I was like, "And...". But I'll never forget that year we went to Canada and you took us to Uncle Tom's cabin. And I brought back my little memorabilia or whatever and when I went to go see my friends and they would tease me about being Uncle Tom. Because you had taken me to Canada and taken me to the real Uncle Tom's cabin, I was 12 years old and - that was 36 years ago, good God – and I was able to come back to them and school them on who Uncle Tom really was. And 32 years later, I am still schooling people when they use Uncle Tom in a negative, derogatory manner. I am schooling them on who Uncle Tom was and how he worked with freeing the slaves and this and that. And what they are deriving as a negative regarding Uncle Tom is what Hollywood has displayed to them and again being manipulated by a small populous when it comes to that. So I want to thank you for that because that gave me a lot of strength because you know how much I got teased when I was a kid but that gave me some staying power because I was standing. And they laughed at first. But after a while, I didn't get called Uncle Tom anymore. Because they knew what the real meaning is. So you probably taught a lot of people that summer because I sure was saying it all summer long. Run into the house and getting my stuff that you showed us that we got back, so, you know, you've done some -
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FG: Along with that, I've tried to teach you all about relationship between races. I tried to teach you all to identify with the person, not with the race because that's completely wrong. It has been done to us because one does something they think all blacks do it. And it has been done to us and I've tried to teach you all get to know the people, the person and you don't judge one person by everybody else and I have tried to teach you all that you can relate and be friends with any race.
TG: And last but not least, what was your reaction when Obama became president? How did you feel? What did you think about?
FG: I had two reactions. I'm very proud, extremely proud. And then my next reaction was, "We have got to pray that this man makes it". We have to pray to make him strong because they will fight a man when he's trying to do what this guy has got to do because we've had other presidents in the situation not as bad but in the same situation. And they have knocked them down to the ground before they saw success and he is a black man and how far are they going to knock him down before he is successful in what he's trying to do. So I was very proud, very, very proud. And I felt – Say a certain prayer for him and hoping that people throughout this country is praying that he is successful not as – What's his name? - Limbaugh says he's hoping that he will fail.
TG: Which would ruin the country.
FG: And that means that he hopes the country goes down the drain rather than to have a black man be successful. I have all those different things. And after thinking about it, the next morning I got up thinking how proud our children – I'm back to children again – how proud our children have to be to know that once upon a time – You'd say. "What do you want to be?" and they'd say president. And now they can say president and be proud of it.
TG: Well, we're going to go out on a good note. I just want people to remember how important education is and because you were strong and not allowing the fact that you are an African-American to inhibit you rather it empowered you. I want people to realize that you got to do stuff that people all over the world never even dreamed about doing. Because you got an education and because you didn't let anything stop you. So, I want people to know that you were in Hawaii before it was even a state.

Tell me a little bit about that and we'll go out on that tip. (Ms. Gill laughing softly) Most people haven't made it to Hawaii now and you were living there before it became commercialized.
FG: And its a completely different thing. When I was there, the Hawaiians ran their country. There was no segregation because at one instance, we had gone into a restaurant, my girlfriend and I, and these people here call the waiter because they did not want to sit beside me, they wanted us to be moved. And the waiter said very politely, "If you cannot sit where you're sitting because its beside them then you need to leave". Now, you'll never hear that. You will never hear that now. It was beautiful because they had families in the parks. You would see families in the parks enjoying themselves. You'd go to concerts and people were not dressed up and what have you, they were dressed, period. And you could enjoy your concerts and what have you. I went back 3 or 4 years ago, it was completely different. I mean, it was asphalt city. The buildings were high. The parks, there were parks, but they were parks like our parks. There were no empty spaces. There were and you could tell like we can tell what it is, segregation. I mean, you have to see it. You have to feel it but its there. It has changed to such an extent that it was just -
TG: Heartbreaking.
FG: Yes it was. I called my girlfriend that was in Hawaii with me. I called her when we came back, Andrea and I came back to the hotel and I called her and I was crying and she said, "What is wrong with you?". And I said, "This is nothing like I dreamt about it. I wanted to come back". She said, "I told you. When I came back through there, I told you how it was". Its beautiful. Its still beautiful and what have you but the situations are completely different.
TG: So you got to experience the real essence of the true, raw Hawaii.
FG: Yeah.
TG: Only because, and this is absolutely true, because you had an education and you went into the military and became an officer. Were you a lieutenant?
FG: I was a 1st lieutenant and then I was a 2nd lieutenant and when I got out, I had been given papers for captain but I had got married and I got out.
TG: And this is all in the early '50s, late '40s, early '50s, during the Korean War that this was going on. And you were a black woman from a small little country town born in another smaller country town, if you want to give it that much props. Did all of that because you got an education and because you had no fear and you had God in your heart. That's awesome. I don't' think you realize how phenomenal your accomplishments are. I don't think you grasp it.
FG: I want to put one thing out here and that is, its the way you carry yourself. You don't have to be forceful in what I want and will not accept because I have been on wards where doctors are coming in and tell the little dirty jokes. And the nurses laughed. I don't. I might've heard one dirty joke from 'em and that's it. They never said anything else again. I mean, its how you accept things and how you do – You don't accept it, you let people know by your actions that you will not accept it. And that's what we need to do. We need to not laugh at something or accept something and then go later (recording ends)