

# CITY OF HIGH POINT

## AGENDA ITEM



**Title:** **Historic Marker Request**  
(Childhood Home of John Coltrane)

**From:** Lee Burnette, Planning & Development  
Director

**Meeting Date:** February 18, 2019

**Public Hearing:** No

**Advertising Date:** NA

**Advertised By:** NA

**Attachments:** A. Historic Preservation Commission Recommendation  
B. Staff Report

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### **PURPOSE:**

A request by Yalik's Modern Art and the High Point Commemoration Committee for 400 Years of African American History, in partnership with the Hayden-Harman Foundation, to place a historic marker recognizing the childhood home of John Coltrane at 118 Underhill Street.

### **BACKGROUND:**

The Historic Preservation Commission is designated by the Historic Marker Policy to review and evaluate all proposed roadside historic markers prior to consideration by City Council. This roadside historic marker request is the sixth request under the City's roadside historic marker policy.

### **BUDGET IMPACT:**

The Hayden-Harman Foundation is donating \$2,200 for the purchase of this marker.

### **RECOMMENDATION / ACTION REQUESTED:**

- A. Staff recommended approval of this request as outlined in the attached staff report.
- B. On January 9, 2019, the Historic Preservation Commission recommended approval of this request by a vote of 7-0.

## **HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION**

### **Historic Marker Request recognizing the childhood home of John Coltrane**

At its January 9, 2019 meeting, the Historic Preservation Commission reviewed a request for a historic marker recognizing the childhood home of John Coltrane. Seven members of the Commission were present. Mr. David Fencl, Senior Planner, presented the request and recommended approval of the request as outlined in the staff report.

The Historic Preservation Commission determined that the proposed marker met the minimum evaluation criteria of the Historic Marker Policy which includes the site or event being at least 50 years old, no public or private markers currently recognizing the site or event within the city, and the location of the proposed marker is within the corporate limits. The Historic Preservation Commission also determined that the proposed marker will be consistent in appearance with several existing City markers and recommended approval of the historic marker request, as recommended by staff, by a vote of 7-0.



**To:** Historic Preservation Commission Members

**From:** David Fencil, Senior Planner

**Meeting Date:** January 9, 2019

**Subject:** John Coltrane Childhood Home Historic Marker Request by Yalik's Modern Art and the High Point Commemoration Committee for 400 Years of African American History, in partnership with the Hayden-Harman Foundation

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**PURPOSE:**

The Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) is designated by the Historic Marker Policy to review all requests for historic markers to be located in public street rights-of-way. The HPC shall first determine whether the request meets the minimum evaluation criteria outlined in the policy, and if the request meets the minimum evaluation criteria, the HPC shall then evaluate the request based on relevant criteria as determined by the HPC.

The following criteria must be present and factually correct in order for the HPC to review any request for placement of a marker:

1. Any site or event requested to be recognized must be at least 50 years old and for any individual to be recognized with a marker, the individual's contribution that is the subject of the request must have occurred as least 50 years before the request.
2. There may not be any current markers, public or private, currently recognizing the site or event within the City of High Point.
3. The location requested to be recognized must be within the corporate limits of the City of High Point and within public view.

Requests for markers shall be evaluated based on relevant criteria as determined by the HPC, including the following:

1. Is each historical claim by the applicant presenting the request supported by documentation or other evidence of the claim's validity? Documentation should consist of primary sources that were created at the time of the event and may include tax records, deeds, newspaper articles, meeting minutes, photographs, etc. Secondary sources may be submitted to help provide context and justify the significance of the event, person, or location.
2. In an attempt to avoid repetition and promote diversity in the recognitions, is the requested site, event or individual closely related to a site, event or individual

- accomplishment that has already been recognized with a Marker?
3. Has the site, event, or individual contribution maintained its significance over time?
  4. Is the site, event or individual recognized outside of High Point at state wide, national, or international levels?
  5. Marker proposals will be rejected if the Commission cannot authenticate or verify the historical information to its satisfaction. The Commission shall make the deciding rule if there is conflicting evidence.

**STAFF ANALYSIS:**

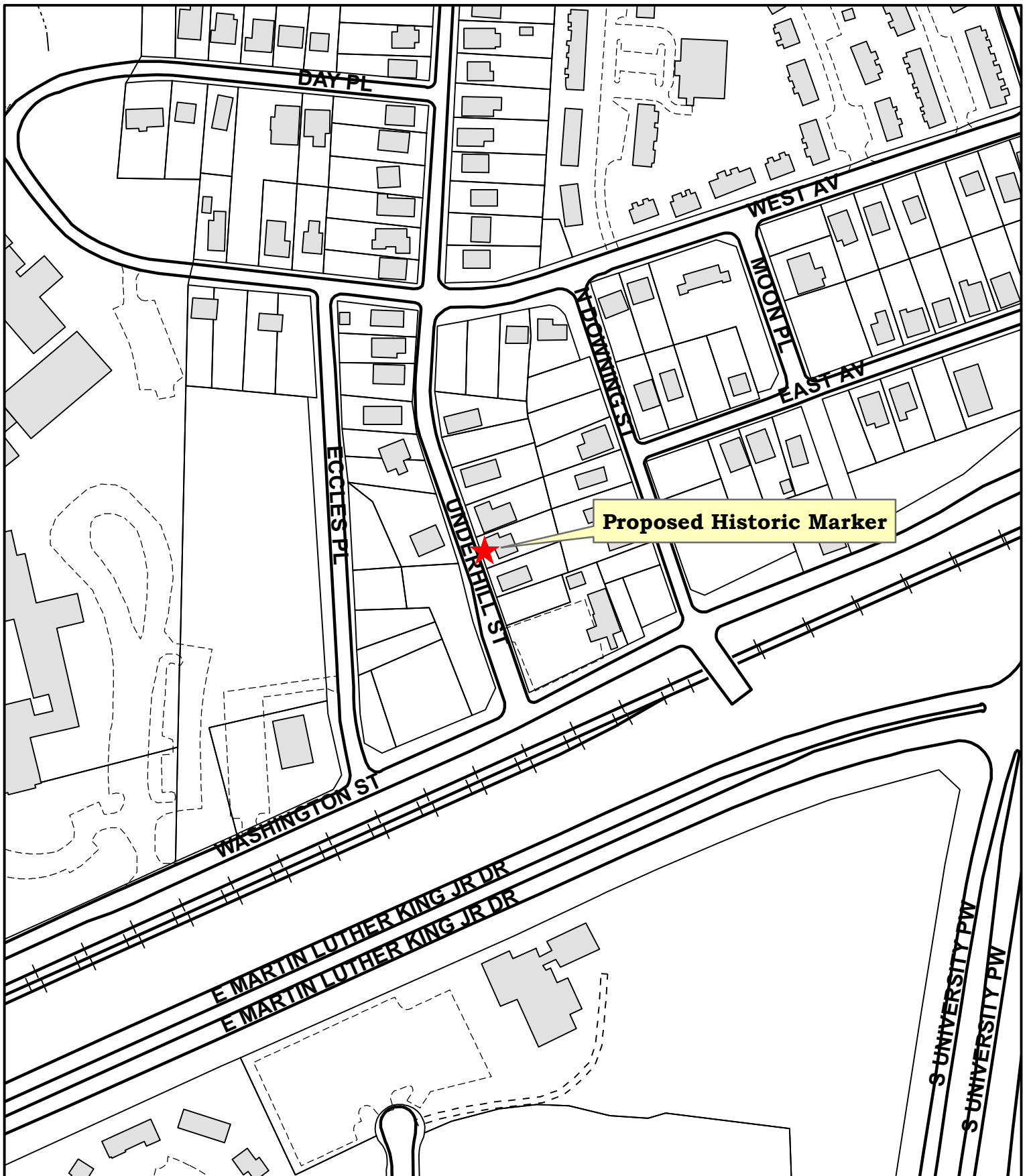
According to the information supplied with this Historic Marker Request, the childhood home of jazz great, John Coltrane, is located at 118 Underhill Street. Built in late 1928 and early 1929 by Coltrane's maternal grandfather, Rev. William Wilson Blair, the home is a two-story frame house located in the Griffin Park neighborhood, north of the Washington Street National Register Historic District. The 1929-1930 High Point City Directory, as well as the 1930 US Census, lists both the Blair and Coltrane Families in residence at 118 Underhill Street. According to the information in the marker request, John Coltrane lived in the house with his extended family from 1928 through 1943.

Staff believes that this historic marker request meets the minimum evaluation criteria due to the period John Coltrane was living at 118 Underhill Street being more than 50 years ago, there are no other historic markers recognizing the childhood home of John Coltrane and the marker's proposed location is within the City of High Point and within public view. The applicant has submitted copies of primary resources, such as the 1929 and 1930 City Directory, as well as the 1930 and 1940 US Census to document the claims that Coltrane's family was living at 118 Underhill Street. The significance of John Coltrane's impact on the history of music has been maintained since his death in 1967 and his contributions to music are recognized outside of High Point at an international level.

**RECOMMENDATION / ACTION REQUESTED:**

Staff recommends the Historic Preservation Commission recommend approval of the historic marker request identifying the childhood home of John Coltrane. This historic marker request meets the minimum evaluation criteria, and with the documentation submitted with this request, staff believes this request meets all of the relevant evaluation criteria of the Historic Marker Policy.

**Attachments:** John Coltrane childhood home Historic Marker Location Map  
Historic Marker Request and Documentation



**HISTORIC MARKER REQUEST**

118 Underhill Street  
Childhood home of John Coltrane



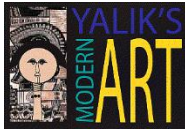
Proposed marker location

Planning & Development  
Department

City of High Point



Scale: 1"=200'



Yalik's Modern Art 115 Parkview Terrace Lane Jamestown NC, 27282

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November 14, 2018

David Fencl, Senior Planner

Department of Planning and Development  
City of High Point  
P.O. Box 230  
High Point, North Carolina 27261

RE: High Point Preservation Commission Approval  
Historic Marker, Childhood home of John Coltrane

Dear Mr. Fencl,

Yalik's Modern Art, High Point Commemorative 400 Years of African American History Committee, in partnership with the Hayden-Harman Foundation hereby requesting a positive recommendation to place a cast aluminum roadside historical marker at the childhood home of jazz great, John Coltrane, which is located at 118 Underhill St

The purpose of this marker is to preserve the home of an international icon and a native son of our great city. Built in late 1928, early 1929 by Coltrane's maternal grandfather, Rev. William Wilson Blair, a former slave, this modest two-story house is a precious jewel nestled in the heart of what once was a prominent African American community.

The city of High Point has lost a lot of historical landmarks within the last several years, especially within the Washington St. area. There is an urgency to preserve, promote and bring awareness to the history of a historic community. By installing a historical marker at 118 Underhill St, this would be a step towards preserving and honoring what is still standing. It will also show the world that we are proud to have had John Coltrane as one of our citizens. He is our international Icon.

The Hayden-Harman Foundation, a Non-profit organization is donating \$2200.00 for the purchase of the marker. These funds are currently in hand and will be distributed in June 2019 for the roadside marker.

This project is one of many, which will help preserve, promote and bring awareness to the history of the African American community

Thank you for this consideration.

Sincerely,

Phyllis Bridges, CEO  
Yalik's Modern Art  
[pbridgesa@gmail.com](mailto:pbridgesa@gmail.com)  
(336) 989-0047

The cast aluminum roadside marker falls under the new City of High Point Historic Marker Policy. The wording was chosen by Chapel Hill music scholar, David Tegnell and reads as followed:



We would like to use the following shape mounted on a 7-foot post with the City seal. The following measurements and costs of the roadside marker are from Sewah Studios in Marietta, Ohio, who make many state roadside markers in cast aluminum and bronze throughout the US, including those for NC.

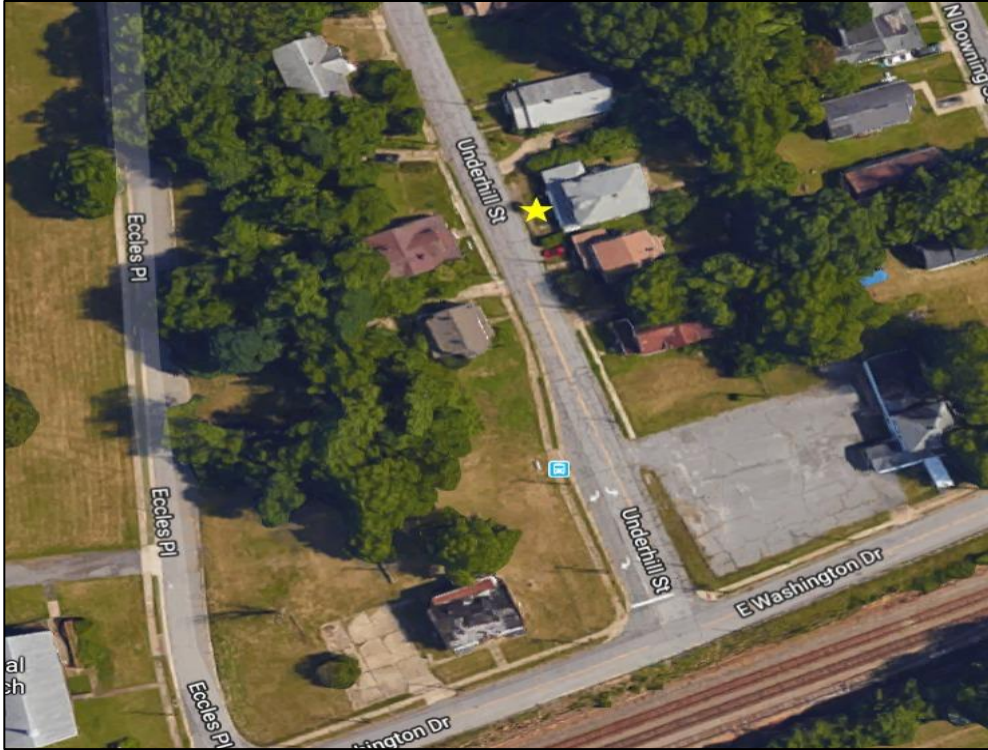
Size: 30”x 42” Georgia pattern  
Style: Georgia Pattern  
Post: 7 foot mounting post  
Letters: 1 inch  
Same copy both sides.





John Coltrane (b. 1926-d.1967), world renowned jazz saxophonist and composer of the suite “A Love Supreme”, lived with his extended family at 118 Underhill St. from 1928-1943. His family was headed by his maternal grandfather, Rev. W. W. Blair, who built the house. Rev. Blair was an ex-slave and outspoken activist who was elected Chowan County Commissioner in 1896 and who later became a presiding elder of the AME Zion Church. In High Point, he led citizen groups that lobbied successfully for additional schools for African-American children. John Coltrane owed his stable upbringing and early musical education to his grandfather’s efforts.

Erected by the High Point Commemoration Committee for 400 Years of African American History  
in partnership with the Hayden Harman Foundation.  
August 30, 2019



**John Coltrane Home** 118 Underhill St. High Point, NC 2726

\*Historical Marker Location



State North Carolina Incorporated place High Point City  
County Guilford County Ward of city Second Ward Block No.       
Township or division of county High Point Township Unincorporated place       
(Insert proper name and also name of class, as township, town, precinct, district, etc. See instructions.)

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE-BUREAU OF THE CENSUS  
FIFTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES: 1930  
POPULATION SCHEDULE

Enumeration District No. 41-55

Supervisor's District No. 2nd HC

Sheet No.

13 B

6001

Enumerated by me on April 11, 1930, Tracy A. Hamilton, Enumerator.

Serial number, race, sex, etc.	PLACE OF ABODE				NAME of each person whose place of abode on April 1, 1930, was in this family Enter surname first, then the given name and initials, giving the full name in case of children under 18 years of age. Omit children born since April 1, 1930.	RELATIONSHIP Relationship of this person to the head of the family	HOME DATA				PERSONAL DESCRIPTION				EDUCATION		PLACE OF BIRTH			MOTHER TONGUE (OR NATIVE LANGUAGE) OF FOREIGN BORN			CITIZENSHIP, ETC.			OCCUPATION AND INDUSTRY			EMPLOYMENT			VETERANS		
	House number (in case of tenement)	Number of dwelling house in order of valuation	Number of family in order of valuation	Value of home, including land, as of April 1, 1930			Married or single	Age of head of family	Sex	Color or race	Age at last birthday	Mental condition	Age at first marriage	Age at present	Whether able to read and write English	Place of birth of each person enumerated and of his or her parents. If born in the United States, give State or Territory. If of foreign birth, give country in full. If naturalized, give date of naturalization. If foreign born, give country of birth. If born in Canada, English, and Irish Free State from Northern Ireland	Language spoken in home before coming to the United States	CODE (For office use only. Do not write in this column)	Year of immigration	Year of naturalization	Whether able to speak English	Occupation Trade, profession, or occupation, or service, as enumerator, clerk, driver, janitor, etc.	INDUSTRY Industry or business, as contractor, carpenter, electrician, etc.	CODE (For office use only. Do not write in this column)	Class of worker	Whether actually at work yesterday (or the last regular working day)	Whether ever in U. S. military or naval service	Whether ever in U. S. military or naval service						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32			
51				Holly Henry	Head												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
52				Alvin	son												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
53				Royal Morel	son												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
54	721	223	261	Prince Samuel	Head	R	12										South Carolina	South Carolina	South Carolina															
55				Nannie	wife H												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
56				Fannie	daughter												North Carolina	South Carolina	North Carolina															
57	305	224	262	Brynn Thomas	Head	O	2500										North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
58				Hennette	wife H												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
59				Louise	son												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
60				Maude Carrie	roomer												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
61				Betty ab.	roomer												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
62	207	225	263	White Moses	Head	R	16										North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
63				Volot	wife H												South Carolina	South Carolina	South Carolina															
64				Louise	son												North Carolina	North Carolina	South Carolina															
65				Salma	daughter												North Carolina	North Carolina	South Carolina															
66				Margie	daughter												North Carolina	North Carolina	South Carolina															
67				Robert	son												North Carolina	North Carolina	South Carolina															
68				Louise	brother												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
69				Frederick	nephew												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
70	209	226	264	Sludon Willie	Head	R	12										North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
71				Isabel	wife H												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
72				Louise	son												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
73				George	daughter												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
74	211	227	266	Dillingham John ab.	Head	R	20										North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
75				Alce	wife H												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
76				Ula	daughter												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
77				Wattie	daughter												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
78				Annie	daughter												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
79				Mamie	daughter												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
80	213	228	267	Whitely Rulley	Head	O	1800										South Carolina	South Carolina	South Carolina															
81				Mary	wife H												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
82				Lufay	son												North Carolina	South Carolina	North Carolina															
83				Ruby Jr	son												North Carolina	South Carolina	North Carolina															
84				Mary	daughter												North Carolina	South Carolina	North Carolina															
85				Ernie	daughter												North Carolina	South Carolina	North Carolina															
86	201	230	269	Hill Nelson	Head	O	1800										North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
87				Lara	wife H												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
88	114	231	270	Lellie Clarence	Head	R	20										North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
89				Rosey Mamie	daughter												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
90				Freeman Martha	mother H												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
91	118	232	271	Oliver William	Head	O	2000										North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
92				Alce	wife H												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
93				Coltrane John	son												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
94				Alce	daughter												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
95				John	son												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
96	119	233	272	Ingraham Columbus	Head	O	2000										North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
97				Georgia	wife H												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
98				Louise	son												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
99				Columbus Jr	son												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															
100				Henry	son												North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina															

ABBREVIATIONS TO BE USED IN COLUMNS INDICATED:  
(For abbreviations for State or country of birth, see instructions.)

Col. 6-Indicates whether in each family the father, mother, or child is of foreign birth. See instructions.

Col. 7-Indicates whether in each family the father, mother, or child is of foreign birth. See instructions.

Col. 8-Indicates whether in each family the father, mother, or child is of foreign birth. See instructions.

Col. 9-Indicates whether in each family the father, mother, or child is of foreign birth. See instructions.

Col. 10-Indicates whether in each family the father, mother, or child is of foreign birth. See instructions.

Col. 11-Indicates whether in each family the father, mother, or child is of foreign birth. See instructions.

Col. 12-Indicates whether in each family the father, mother, or child is of foreign birth. See instructions.

Col. 13-Indicates whether in each family the father, mother, or child is of foreign birth. See instructions.

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Collins Claude (Helen), emp Piedmont Hos Mills, h 301 Church  
Collins Curtis L (Birdie M), furn wkr, h 1242 s Main  
Collins Emma Miss, spinner Highland Mills, h 278 Young, same  
Collins Estelle Miss, student, h 511 Willowbrook  
Collins Granite Co, crushed stone 503 w High, G W Rhodes mngr  
Collins Helen Mrs, looper Piedmont Hos Mills, h 301 Church  
Collins Lee (Ruby), emp Marietta Paint & Color Co, h 512 w Ray  
Collins Luvenia Miss, slsldy Belk-Stevens Co, h 511 Willowbrook  
Collins Mamie Miss, emp Highland Mills, h 278 Young, same  
Collins Minnie Miss, emp Highland Mills, h 278 Young, same  
Collins Myra Mrs, h 511 Willowbrook  
Collins W Blaine (Lillie), night watchmn Hillcrest Silk Mills, h 406 South  
\*Collins Wm (Callie), porter, h 1217 Hoover  
Collins Wm C, driver City Fuel Co, h Mangum av  
Collins Wm L (Vallie), carp, h 1102 Campbell  
Colonial Furniture Co, mnfrs 1519 s Main nr Asheboro Ry, L R Stewart pres,  
L R Thompson v-pres, J V Thompson sec-treas  
COLONIAL LIFE INSURANCE CO of High Point N C, 801-2-3-4-5 Coml Natl  
Bk Bldg—phone 2706, Fred N Tate pres, Jno C Abels v-pres-mngr, J Elwood  
Cox v-pres, H F Abels sec, C M Hauser treas, Dr D A Stanton medical  
director, Peacock & Dalton genl counsel (see bottom lines & p 19)  
\*Colson David (Esther), fcty wkr, h 1013 Hoover

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\*Colson Esther, maid Y W C A, h 1013 Hoover  
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Coltrane A B, res Trinity N C  
Coltrane Bessie Miss, looper Harris-Covington Hos Mills, h 927 Randolph  
Coltrane Chas C (Bertha), emp Marsh Furn Co, h 305 Osborne (C)  
Coltrane Jas O (Ella), farmer, h 1806 King (C)  
Coltrane Jno A (Ada K), (Imperial Upholstering Co), h 310 Coltrane (C)  
\*Coltrane Jno R (Alice), tailor 769 e Washington, h 213 Price  
Coltrane Lewis W (Mary B), furn wkr, h 624 Park  
Coltrane Ludie Mrs, winder Cloverdale Dye Wks, bds 328 Greer (C)  
\*Coltrane Lula, cook, 421 e Washington  
Coltrane Martesia T Mrs, inspr Amos Hos Mills, h 927 Randolph  
\*Coltrane Marvin, emp N C P S Co  
Coltrane Paul (Ludie), emp Sou Mirror Co, bds 328 Greer (C)  
Coltrane Pearl Mrs, emp H P Mnfg Co, h 206½ n Main  
Coltrane Ralph (Alma), painter Sou Furn Co, h 927 Randolph  
Coltrane Reid (Ruth), weaver Stehli Silk Corp, bds 1107 e Green  
Coltrane Reitzel, mill wkr, h 310 Coltrane (C)  
\*Coltrane Sallie, dom, h 716 Leonard  
Coltrane W Edgar (Emma), h 1809 King (C)  
\*Coltrane Wm M (Lessie), pipe ftr, h 1500 West  
Combs Chas W (Letha), h 2332 English  
Combs David H (Emma L), h 412 Tate  
Combs Emma L Mrs, boarding 412 Tate, h same

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HIGH POINT, N. C. (1928-29), CITY DIRECTORY

171

Combs Herbert, student, h 2332 English  
Combs M C (Gladys), mill wkr, h s Main extd, R D 3  
Comer Adam F (Margaret), h 1303 Franklin  
Comer Arnold (Mallie), weaver Stehli Silks Corp, h 1103 Anderson  
Comer Cener, h 501 Woodbury av  
Comer Ernest, furn mkr, bds 214 Ennis  
Comer Ernest W, emp Tomlinson Chair Mnfg Co, h 505 Woodbury av  
Comer Fannie M Miss, emp Hillcrest Silk Mills, h 1303 Franklin  
Comer Franey L, wid J W, h 1103 Anderson  
Comer Geo S, driver, h 505 Woodbury av  
Comer Geo W, bds 301 Hicks  
Comer Grady M, emp Tomlinson Chair Mnfg Co, h 505 Woodbury av  
Comer Helen Miss, looper H P Hos Mills, h 3 Redding Apts  
Comer Hugh M, emp Hillcrest Silk Mills, h 1303 Franklin  
Comer Jno H (Artimitia), h 505 Woodbury av  
Comer Kelly W, weaver Stehli Silks Corp, h 1103 Anderson  
Comer Loretta Miss, emp Hillcrest Silk Mills, h 1303 Franklin  
Comer Myrtle Miss, emp Stehli Silks Corp, h 1103 Anderson  
Comer Ora Miss, emp Stehli Silks Corp, h 1103 Anderson  
Comer Rona Miss, emp Hillcrest Silk Mills, h 505 Woodbury av  
Comer Roy E (Nina M), emp Marsh Furn Co, h 1203 Filbert  
Comer Saml H, weaver Stehli Silks Corp, h 1103 Anderson  
Comer Walter C, slsmn, h 4 Madison Apts

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Commercial Club (The), 214 s Main, J H Dobbs pres, S L Davis Jr v-pres, F J  
Sizemore sec-treas  
COMMERCIAL NATIONAL BANK (The), s Main cor Commerce—phone 333,  
J Elwood Cox pres, C M Hauser v-pres, V A J Idol v-pres-trust officer, C H  
Marriner cashr, E B Steed, J W Hiatt and W T Saunders asst cashrs (see  
top lines)  
COMMERCIAL NATIONAL BANK BLDG, s Main cor Commerce  
COMMERCIAL SERVICE CO, publishers High Point and other city directories,  
Asheville N C, P O Box 1098, E H Miller pres-genl mngr  
COMMONWEALTH HOSIERY MFLS (Inc), (r) 600 e Green, R R Ragan pres,  
C M Hauser v-pres, E M Freeze sec-treas  
Compton C Bernard (Ada), sign painter, h 400 Greer (C)  
Compton Chas B (Dixie G), spl agt O Henry Agency Pilot Life Ins Co, h 508  
Sunset Drive  
Compton Danl, slsmn, h 212 Steele  
Compton Julia D Miss, student, h 508 Sunset Drive  
Compton Margaret S Miss, student, h 508 Sunset Drive  
Conaly H Grady (Bertha W), h 1104 Blain  
Conant Lawrence W (Dorritt), consulting engnr, h 603 Hillcrest Drive  
Coney Island Lunch (Gus Dalaklis), 126 n Wrenn

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Talk  
Service  
We  
Give It!

160 HIGH POINT, N. C. (1929-30) CITY DIRECTORY

Cole O Thos, mngr Southern Dairies (Inc), h 1103 n Main  
\*Cole Riley, lab, h 1317 Washington  
Cole Saml (Kathleen M), contr, h 300 Best  
Cole Sarah R Miss, looper H P Hos Mills, h 115 w State  
Cole Thos E (Allie), clk, h 115 w State  
\*Cole Wm (Annie), lab, h 1315 Olga  
Coleman Alice L Miss, looper Hanes Hos Mills, h 215 Idol  
Coleman Carl, furn wkr, h 515 Farlow  
Coleman Chas, furn wkr, h 515 Farlow  
\*Coleman Clay, lab, h 514 Hulda  
Coleman Clyde S (Bessie), fudn wkr, h 511 Farlow  
\*Coleman Geo, cook Friendly Cafeteria, h 731 1/2 e Washington  
\*Coleman Irving (Rosa), lab, h 604 Vail  
\*Coleman Jno, lab, h 605 Leonard  
Coleman Jno L (Coleman's Lunch), h 612 Lindsay  
Coleman Lester, furn wkr, h 515 Farlow  
Coleman Lillian, wid J A, emp Kern Hos Mills, bds 1003 Pershing  
Coleman's Lunch (J L Coleman), 1317 1/2 n Main  
\*Coleman May (Hattie), lab, h 417 Fremont  
Coleman Ruby Miss, mill wkr, h 515 Farlow  
\*Coleman Saml, lab, rms 605 Leonard  
Coleman Saml C (Martha J), h 215 Idol  
Coleman Walter (Lula), furn wkr, h 515 Farlow  
Coleman Wm A (Effie), h 1120 English  
Coley Robt L (Mary), h 206 w Green  
COLLIE HOWARD L (Ann H), mngr Home Bond & Mortgage Co, ofc 103 w  
Washington—phone 4300, h 1015 Arlington av—phone 4-8229  
Colliers Ettie C, wid J L, h 601 e Green  
\*Collins Alta, cook, h 118 Hobson  
Collins Artie Miss, emp Highland Mills, h 231 Mill  
\*Collins Carl (Emma), lab, h 505 Vail  
Collins Chas B (Josephine), emp Highland Mills, h 278 Young  
Collins Claud (Helen), h 505 Kennedy  
Collins Curtis L (Berta M), emp Globe Parlor Furn Co, h 1104 Lake  
Collins Dewey, furn wkr, h 1307 Short Kearns  
\*Collins Emma, ironer Dutch Ldy, h 505 Vail  
Collins Emma Mrs, h 1202 English  
Collins Estelle, h 500 Richardson  
Collins Gurney L, agt Pilot Life Ins Co, h 200 Roland Park av  
Collins Howard (Anna), real est, h 1015 Arlington av  
Collins Hucie Miss, opr Marinello Beauty Shop, rms Y W C A  
\*Collins Jno, student, h 1216 Hoover  
Collins Lee (Ruby), h 512 n Ray  
Collins Luvenia Miss, slsdy Moffitt Furnishing Co, h 500 Richardson  
Collins Minnie Miss, emp Highland Mills, h 278 Young  
Collins Myra Mrs, h 500 Richardson  
Collins Richd, bds Highland Bdg House  
Collins Robt D, restr 709 Highland av, h Highland Bdg House  
Collins Ruby Mrs, bkkpr Cut-Rate Furn Co, h 512 w Ray  
Collins Theodore C, asst mngr Cut-Rate Furn Co, h 512 w Ray  
Collins W Blaine (Lillie), emp Hillcrest Silk Mills, h 406 South  
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\*Colton Jas (Ollie), lab, h 107-123 Booker  
Coltrane Bessie Miss, emp Amos Hos Co, h 815 Park  
Coltrane Carl W, student, h 1611 Bradley  
Coltrane Chas C (Bertha), emp Marsh Furn Co, h 305 Osborne  
Coltrane Eleanor C Mrs, asst sec H P Merchants Assn, res Trinity N C  
Coltrane Frances Miss, student, h 310 Coltrane, C'dale  
Coltrane Grayton B, furn wkr, h 1806 King, C'dale  
Coltrane J Oliver (Ella), furn wkr, h 1806 King C'dale  
Coltrane J Reitzel, student, h 310 Coltrane, C'dale  
Coltrane Jno A (Ada K) (Imperial Upholstering Co), h 310 Coltrane, C'dale  
\*Coltrane Jno R (Alice), tailor 769 e Washington, h 118 Underhill  
Coltrane Lisitha Mrs, emp Amos Hos Co, h 815 Park  
Coltrane Louis W (Mary), h 624 Park  
Coltrane Paul E (Ludie), bds 328 Greer  
Coltrane Ralph (Alma), emp Sou Chair Co, h 815 Park  
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Combs Percy (Myrtle), emp Highland Mills, h 327 Connor  
Combs Turner, hosiery wkr, h 412 Tate  
Comer Adam F (Margaret), h 1303 Franklin  
Comer Ernest W, h 505 Woodbury av  
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Comer Geo S, clk A C Morris, h 505 Woodbury av  
Comer Geo W, h 301 Hicks  
Comer Grady M, h 505 Woodbury av  
Comer Hugh M, emp Hillcrest Silk Mills, h 1303 Franklin  
Comer Jno H (Artie M), farmer, h 505 Woodbury av  
Comer Jno R (Malie), silk wkr, h 1103 Anderson  
Comer Kelly, silk wkr, h 1103 Anderson  
Comer Myrtle Miss, silk wkr, h 1103 Anderson  
Comer Onnie A Miss, winder, h 505 Woodbury av  
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 \*Coltrane Jno R (Alice), tailor 769 e Washington, h 118 Underhill  
 Coltrane Lewis W (Mary), painter, h 624 Park  
 Coltrane Lisitha Mrs, emp Amos Hos Mills, h 815 Park  
 Coltrane Mamie Miss, h 1806 King, C'dale  
 Coltrane Paul (Sudie), emp Pittsburg Plate Glass Co, h 1807 King, C'dale  
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 Combs W Turner, emp Lock Knit Hos Mills, h 412 Tate  
 Comer Adam F (Margaret), boarding 1303 Franklin, h same  
 Comer Ernest C, emp Thomas Mills, bds 113 Clay  
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 Comer F Louisa, wid J W, h 1103 Anderson  
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 Comer Jno H (Artie M), truck farmer, h 505 Woodbury av  
 Comer Kelly W, weaver Stehli Silks Corp, h 1103 Anderson  
 Comer Myrtle Miss, emp Stehli Silks Corp, h 1103 Anderson  
 Comer Onnie Miss, mill wkr, h 505 Woodbury av  
 Comer Ora Miss, emp Stehli Silks Corp, h 1103 Anderson  
 Comer Patsie Mrs, h 324 Phillips  
 Comer R Ernest (Nina M), foreman Marsh Furn Co, h 1203 Filbert  
 Comer Rona Miss, emp H P Overall Co, h 505 Woodbury av  
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Connor Clyde H, student, h 515 Newton

Connor Earl B, student, h 209 s Burton

Connor Geo C (Don Reid), mech Geo W Lowe, h 518 Denny

Connor J Orlando (Ellen), genl contr 432 e Washington, h same

Connor J Robt, carp, h 209 s Burton

Connor Jas H, student, h 432 e Washington

Connor Marion C Rev (Aurilla), pastor First Wesleyan Meth Ch, h 515 Newton

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# Boys' Chorus Adds To School's Music Prestige

The William Penn Boys' Chorus has brought new glory to a school traditionally rich in music lore.

The Chorus is under the able direction of Prof. S. E. Burford who first organized the group three years ago. Each of the previous years graduation has ridded him of several of his best singers but the Chorus has improved nonetheless.

This year the Chorus has made an unprecedented number of public appearances. It has sung before gatherings at colleges, high schools, churches, both colored and white, community singings and club meetings. By popular demand the chorus has made numerous return engagements.

The Chorus gave a Easter recital at which time Father Bernadine, Catholic minister, was guest speaker. Mrs. Everett Marsh was also on the program and presented monograms to the members of the Chorus. Mrs. Marsh is the first woman to receive a post on the local school board. Those boys receiving lyres were William Alston, ~~Charles Armstrong~~, Robert Davis, Ben Whitworth, Charles Reid, Paul Ross, John Coltrane, Edward Ashworth, Edward McDonnell, Jerome Hinson, Harry Hall, Charles Whitted, Louis Foxx, Frank Amaker, John Ingram, Mannassah Crone, Robert Simpson, Henry Simon, Chester Stancil, LeMon Smith, John Tyson, Philip Moore and William Whitney. Mary Retta James, talented soprano, who sings with Chorus, also received a lyre.

May 21, 1943



## Franklin Brower

Franklin Dewitt Brower and John Coltrane grew up as boyhood friends in High Point, North Carolina. Franklin lived just down the street from John, at 218 Underhill Avenue with his parents Thomas (age 41) and Janie (34), and five siblings, Lee (17), George (16), Willie (13), Janie (11), and Carl (2).<sup>1</sup> This already crowded household also included five relatives: two of Janie's sisters, her brother-in-law, and two nieces, as well as two roomers. Such living circumstances were typical of many Underhill families, for whom home ownership was possible only with the combined income of several residents.<sup>2</sup> In the Brower's case, six wage earners contributed to the support of twelve people.<sup>3</sup> Thomas A. Brower made his living as a barber.<sup>4</sup> Both of Franklin's aunts and one of the roomers worked as hand ironers at a laundry (probably High Point Steam Laundry); his uncle was employed as a laborer at a golf course (probably Emerywood Country Club), and the second roomer as a cook at a college (probably High Point College).

Although Franklin was a year older than John,<sup>5</sup> the two boys passed through school together as classmates. Throughout their grade school years, both John Coltrane and Franklin Brower excelled academically, graduating second and third, respectively.<sup>6</sup> But the boys took different paths through high school. While Brower flourished as a student, Coltrane languished. Franklin graduated first among boys in his William Penn High School class, third, overall.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, he served as editor of the student newspaper in both his junior and senior years, as vice-president of the student council during his senior year, and as treasurer of the senior class. John, on the other hand, focused almost exclusively on learning his musical instruments--largely in solitude, and at the expense of his grades. Consequently, at the end of each of his last two years at William Penn, Franklin Brower's classmates voted him most studious boy, while in his senior year, these same classmates deemed John Coltrane most musical boy.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Commerce. *Fifteenth Census of the United States*. Bureau of the Census, Washington, DC, 1930.

<sup>2</sup> The Brower home was valued at \$2,500, roughly equal to that of Reverend W.W. Blair, that is, the house at 118 Underhill, where Coltrane lived. Department of Commerce. *Fifteenth Census of the United States*. Bureau of the Census, Washington, DC, 1930.

<sup>3</sup> By contrast, at the Blair/Coltrane/Lyerly household, two incomes (those of Rev. Blair and John Robert Coltrane) supported seven people (prior to the deaths of Rev. Blair, Alice Virginia Blair, and J. R. Coltrane).

<sup>4</sup> In 1940, Thomas Brower and Frank Smith co-owned a barbershop in the basement of 102 W. Washington Street, where they cut the hair of white patrons. Interview with Lawrence Graves by David Tegnell, 2008. Lawrence Graves, one year younger than John Coltrane, graduated from William Penn High School in 1944. *High Point City Directory, 1940*. (A complete set of High Point city directories may be found in the North Carolina Collection, High Point Public Library, High Point, North Carolina.)

<sup>5</sup> Franklin was born September 12, 1925. *General Index to Vital Statistics*, Guilford County, North Carolina, Births. Coltrane was born September 23, 1926.

<sup>6</sup> News of Interest to Colored People: "Service and Citizenship," *High Point Enterprise*, June 8, 1939.

<sup>7</sup> "Brower Paces Senior Boys Scholastically," *Students' Pen*, May 21, 1943. "Junior Class Superlatives," *Students' pen*, May 22, 1942. No one, junior or senior, was chosen most musical, in 1942, perhaps because the school band was still a work in progress. (A copy of the graduation issue of the *Students' Pen* for each of the years, 1942-44 may be found in the North Carolina Collection, High Point Public Library)

<sup>8</sup> "List of Senior Class Superlatives Released," *Students' Pen*, May 21, 1943.

Brower and Coltrane remained close through much of much of their youth, but as differences emerged, their friendship gradually cooled. Upon graduating from high school in June 1943, Franklin and John left High Point together for Philadelphia,<sup>9</sup> but once there, neither seemed especially interested in continuing their relationship. Over the ensuing years, they saw each other only intermittently<sup>10</sup>

C. O. Simpkins interviewed Franklin Brower at Brower's apartment in New York City in the Fall of 1972, as part of his research for *Coltrane: A Biography*.<sup>11</sup> At the time of the interview, Brower was 47 years old, and had enjoyed a long career as a reporter for newspapers such as the *Philadelphia Afro-American*. Franklin Brower died in 2005.

### Elementary School

**C.O. Simpkins:** When did you first come in contact with John?

**Franklin Brower:** Well, actually, Coltrane and I grew up together in North Carolina in High Point. See, he was born in Hamlet, North Carolina. That's, actually, that's what's listed in all the books, but he was still a pre-school kid when he came to High Point.<sup>12</sup> From what I gather, his grandfather was a Reverend Blair, and did some preachin' around High Point.<sup>13</sup>

**Simpkins:** Yeah, I went down there. Down to Hamlet. And that's where he was born, Hamlet. That's right.

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<sup>9</sup> Brower told Simpkins that he, Coltrane, and James Kinzer took a 10:30 pm train from High Point to Philadelphia on June 11, 1943.

<sup>10</sup> By contrast, Coltrane remained in touch with another childhood friend, Walt Williamson, who lived at 201 Underhill in High Point, sending Williamson a copy of each new album, as it was released. Williamson's sisters have donated some of these albums to the High Point Museum, one of which is the rejected second take of *Ascension*. Interview by David Tegnell with Bertha and Louise Williamson, October 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Simpkins has donated all of the recorded interviews that contributed to *Coltrane: A Biography* to the Jazz Archive at Duke University, but retains copyright. C.O. Simpkins, *Coltrane: A Biography* (Perth Amboy: Herndon House, 1975) (hereinafter, Simpkins, *Coltrane*).

<sup>12</sup> John Coltrane's mother and maternal grandparents resided in High Point, North Carolina, not once, as is generally assumed, but twice. The family first moved to High Point in 1920 when John Coltrane's grandfather, Rev. William Wilson Blair, was appointed pastor of St. Stephen A.M.E. Zion Church. Rev. Blair lived in the church parsonage at 105 Price Street with his wife Alice Virginia, their grown daughters Alice Gertrude and Bettie, and teenage son, John. In October 1920, this family expanded when Bettie Blair married Goler Lyerly. Rev. Blair, who was 60 years old when he took the St. Stephen ministerial post, may have anticipated retiring in High Point, perhaps into a house he hoped to build on the lot at 118 Underhill Avenue, which he purchased in May 1922. But for reasons that remain unclear, these plans were deferred when in 1924 Rev. Blair was transferred to St. Stevens A.M.E. Zion Church in Hamlet. David Tegnell, "Hamlet: Coltrane's Origins," *Jazz Perspectives* (November 2007) 1:2 (hereinafter, Tegnell, "Hamlet.").

<sup>13</sup> In December 1926, John Coltrane's maternal grandfather, Rev. W. W. Blair, who from 1924-1926 had served as pastor of St. Stevens A.M.E. Zion Church in Hamlet, was elevated to the position of presiding elder of the Wadesboro District. Although he was now 66 years old, and may have wished to retire, the raise in salary was probably too great to turn down. But the increased income came at a price: as superintendent, Rev. Blair was required to travel constantly among the churches of his district, and thus to be frequently away from home. Under these circumstances, Rev. Blair's family may have expressed a preference to return to High Point, where they owned property, and schools were available for the education of the newborn John Coltrane. Perhaps, too, Rev. Blair expected to serve as presiding elder for only a year or two, before retiring to High Point. In any event, Rev. Blair took up separate residence from his family, possibly in Kannapolis, halfway between High Point and Wadesboro, 100 miles distant from High Point. Tegnell, "Hamlet."

**Brower:** I imagine you didn't find out too much about John in Hamlet. Did you get to High Point?

**Simpkins:** I went to High Point, too.

**Brower:** Because, well, actually, see this house. Did you see his house in High Point? His home there?

**Simpkins:** One-twenty...Underhill Street<sup>14</sup>

**Brower:** On Underhill Street. I lived at 218 Underhill Street, which is further down...

**Simpkins:** It's down the hill?

**Brower:** You go down the hill, then you go down further. I don't remember Reverend Blair at all--it's the grandfather. But I remember the grandmother, Mrs. Blair. [The] first I can remember Coltrane is, like, in the first grade or second grade, or somewhere along that line. Well, I'd be goin' home from school, I'd stop by his house, 'cause we went to Leonard Street School, which meant that, on my way home, I had to pass his house, and I can just remember a little, playin' around in his yard, there. And, somehow or another, we just became friends. And that situation existed throughout our school years.

**Simpkins:** Do you remember anything about that time? Any things you did together...in first and second grade?

**Brower:** Well, no, not that early. See, in the school system down there, and I imagine all over, they have, I guess it's what they call a track system. They give these [State] tests [and] at the end of the year your class rankin' was A or B. And the children, A-, A-class, were the children who stood highest on these tests, and Coltrane and I just were naturally in the same class. We were always in the A-class. And matter of fact, Coltrane...as I first recall him as a student, was one of the top students. Somehow, I don't remember our first three or four years. Only thing I remember [of] our first four years, like in fourth grade, I remember that some girl came to town, her name was Annie LeGrand.

**Simpkins:** Annie LeGrand?

**Brower:** Yeah, Annie LeGrand. She was from out of town, she wasn't a native High Pointer. She came there like to stay with a relative, and Coltrane and I took an interest in her, and thought she was nice. But that's the fourth grade, we was in Mrs. Whitted's class, but as far as the schoolin' itself, studyin' and stuff like that, I remember in the fifth grade, at the first rankin' of students accordin' to the tests that I can remember, I stood number one, and, then, I don't know where Coltrane stood, but in the sixth grade, I was, like, number two, and some girl named Lula Stanton was number one, but in the seventh grade, I fell to number three, and as I remember, I think Coltrane was one of the two people that stood higher than me<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Simpkins actually means to say "118 Underhill Street." Rev. Blair purchased the lot at 118 Underhill, May 13, 1922, during his earlier tenure as pastor of St. Stephen A.M.E. Zion Church, High Point (1920-1923), but delayed construction until late 1928, after his family returned to High Point from Hamlet. Rev. Blair moved his family into this new house probably during the summer of 1929. *Miller's High Point, N.C. City Directory, 1929-1930*, published September 1929, lists the Blair family in residence at 118 Underhill.

<sup>15</sup> John Coltrane graduated second in his seventh grade class at Leonard Street School. Ceremonies were held at the school at 2:30 pm, Thursday, June 8, 1939. Coltrane delivered the salutatory address, "Indian Life," as part of a program devoted to the history of the Negro in High Point. Valedictorian Wava Robinson spoke on "Negro Schools of High Point," and Franklin Brower on "Background of Negro Churches in High Point." *News of Interest to Colored People*: "Service and Citizenship," *HPE*, June 8, 1939.

But even though he was a good student, say, in those years, somehow or another after he went to high school, he lost interest in bein' a stand-out student, he didn't make the honor lists, anything like that. I don't know what happened to John.<sup>16</sup> But we were still tight in those years, I mean, he was a student who passed his work, but he didn't stand out [as he had in elementary school]. So, like I said, I just remember that fourth grade situation, and I never will forget this girl, Annie LeGrand. I mean she just came to town, even if this became somethin' of a—well, no, I can't put her down, after she started goin' with a very handsome fella, a guy named Harvey Beck, and they were engaged in a certain activity, which we thought was a little wild for people their age. But then later on there was also a girl named Eloise Monroe that had the same situation where she came in from out of town, and Coltrane and I had strong feelings about her, but we were very young then, and I remember these little things, at a time when Coltrane and I weren't that much interested in, say, making girls, just the idea that—or even goin' with girls, you know? Matter of fact, we didn't even start thinking about datin' girls until we was junior in high school. But these early years, like in, say, up until around when we was about twelve years old, before we went to high school, we had the usual interests, I mean we would play ball, stick ball, and he was athletic, you know? But he didn't have any interest in music [or] show any interest in music at all, say, until he was about in his junior year, maybe his sophomore year in high school.<sup>17</sup> But in those elementary school years, he was just [a] typical kid. I think one thing you have to sort of picture, since you've been to High Point, and to sort of give you an idea of the type of growin' up that John was involved in, [he] had certain, maybe several, influences on him, was the fact that he did grow up on Underhill. It may seem kinda silly to think there was, anybody who really knows High Point, to think there was any kind of snobbery, or that a street address could mean anything, but the fact was that Underhill was

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<sup>16</sup> **Ethel Perora Wilson**, Coltrane's English teacher at William Penn High School: He [John Coltrane] was an average student. He prepared his assignments. I don't remember any superior qualities, as a student. I would consider him average.

Ethel Wilson interviewed by C.O. Simpkins, March 1972, previously unpublished. Courtesy, C.O. Simpkins, MD.

<sup>17</sup> **James Boyd**, Coltrane's classmate at William Penn High School: We were in Warren Steele's band, before William Penn had a band. Warren Steele's band was before William Penn's band. See, we moved to William Penn. We were all going to William Penn, except for a few of us that were, a few men that were [out of?] school, you know. See, this was a community deal. It was some kind of community band.

**C.O. Simpkins**: What kind of man was Mr. Steele?

**Boyd**: Mr. Steele? Well, he'd been a Scout Master, he'd been, uh, involved with music, with the community band. He had two bands. Nobody knew too much about the other one. One was a string band. It was a bunch of old men, and then, they played, you know, violins and things. And then he had us. We'd come up to the Community Center, on William Penn School ground. That's where we met; and we played. He helped us get horns [for those] that couldn't get 'em, and he had some old beat-up horns, himself...I don't know who supplied that junk, but anyway, that's what we were doin'.

James Boyd interviewed by C.O. Simpkins, Fall 1972, previously unpublished. Courtesy, C.O. Simpkins, MD. The first documented performance by this community band took place, Friday, October 6, 1939 at the Colored Municipal Park in High Point at an event sponsored by the WPA. "Music for the evening will be rendered by the Community Concert Band, and the Community String Band." *HPE*, October 1, 1939. The William Penn High School Band was formed in the Fall 1940, with a gift of \$100, raised by the P.T.A. In that year, the band numbered eight members. Report of the P.T.A.

really one of the more desirable, if not the most desirable, streets for a Negro family to live on. One thing, it was paved completely, at a time when, I would say, easily, three-quarters of the people, the Negro people in this city, still stayed on dirt roads.<sup>18</sup> And not only that, it had more two-story houses than the average street.<sup>19</sup> Coltrane's house was a fine house, sittin' on the top of that hill, there, and on one side Dr. Gannett built a nice house, and on the other it was Parhams, and across the street the Ingrams, and the other two-family houses like the Drakes', Williamses', Kenos', the Browers', and further down the hill there was another family called the Carl D. Ingrams, which was different from that other family. Matter of fact, I saw Dillard Ingram, who owned that house, not so long ago, he's still gettin' around [unintelligible] into big fights. He's sort of a poolroom<sup>20</sup> operator, bondsman, always had his hands in somethin' nice to turn money. So the Coltrane home was usually referred to as Reverend Blair's house.<sup>21</sup> [Coltrane] grew up on a street that, if you said you lived there, you didn't necessarily lord it over anybody, you know what I mean? It wasn't that everybody on there were professional people; the average person on there just had a routine job in a lotta instances, you know, but the families that had been somehow or another lucky

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<sup>18</sup> The 15-acre area surrounding Underhill known as Jack's Row was described in 1941 as "one of North Carolina's most dismal tenement areas." Joseph Grégoire de Roulhac Hamilton, Jr. (journalist and son of the distinguished history professor and founder of the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill), writing for the *High Point Enterprise*, described the living conditions of Jack's Row "in which the worst elements of the city's Negro population congregated to live" as "squalor born of poverty, tumbledown shacks wherein crime was bred almost at the same rate as human beings, [and] near-primitive 'sanitary conditions,' facilities which served chiefly as disease spreaders." G. de R. Hamilton, Jr., *HPE*, June 22, 1941 and June 7, 1942. When this area was razed to prepare for construction of the federally funded Daniel Brooks Homes project in 1941-42, "workmen engaged in the demolition...found a lack of safety and sanitation [that] was truly something to behold. Structures housing several families but containing only one exit--highly dangerous in case of fire--were not infrequent. In several instances, overcrowding to the point of real danger was evidenced. Numerous houses had highly flammable roofs." "Slums There Were Despite All Cries To The Contrary," *HPE*, June 7, 1942.

<sup>19</sup> **Franklin Brower:** I once looked over a Real Estate Survey of North Carolina cities that was made up in the 1930s by a WPA unit. They surveyed every house in High Point in the Negro neighborhood. According to their findings, 81 percent of the community rented their homes and less than 10 percent of the houses were two-story. So in that respect, the Coltrane home was exceptional in both categories. Franklin Brower quoted in J.C. Thomas, *Chasin' the Trane* (New York, Da Capo Press, 1975), 6. The survey to which Franklin Brower refers is United States, Works Project Administration, *Report of the real property survey, High Point, North Carolina / sponsored by North Carolina State Planning Board [and] city of High Point* (High Point, 1940). A copy may be found in the North Carolina Collection, UNC Libraries, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>20</sup> W. Dillard Ingram operated two billiard parlors on E. Washington Street in High Point, one at 616, and the other at 730. *High Point City Directory, 1942-43*. Ingram also sold ice cream at the Colored Municipal Park, 1900 Edmonson. *High Point City Directory, 1940*.

<sup>21</sup> From 1924, the year of his transfer from High Point to Hamlet, until his death in 1938, Rev. Blair resided in High Point just two years (1930-31), yet throughout these years he remained involved in High Point town politics. He successfully led citizens' organizations in their efforts to lobby for construction of Leonard Street School (1921), the conversion of High Point Industrial Institute to public status (1923), and the construction of Griffin Auditorium on the William Penn High School campus (1928). Some of his contemporaries (such as Walter Hoover and Betty Jackson, in interviews with Simpkins and Tegnell, respectively--unpublished) have described Rev. Blair as the *defacto* mayor of High Point's African American community. Thus, he overshadowed his son-in-law, Coltrane's father, John Robert, a tailor, who also lived at 118 Underhill Avenue. Tegnell, "Hamlet."

enough to buy a house on that particular street would, sort of carried a certain quality to be able to say that you were from Underhill, that you lived on Underhill.<sup>22</sup> I mean, those things can have an influence on your life in a Southern city, as well as in a Northern slum. In other words, it means, in a way, who your neighbors are, who your friends might turn out to be. And I imagine, in our case, if we both didn't stay on the same street, we would probably never gotten as tight as we did, even though there was other people, other boys, other youths that was growin' up at the same time. Matter of fact, we grew up with a lotta school teacher kids, you know, it seemed like our class and most school teachers' sons, and one guy, Bernard Baker, who became a broadcaster at a radio station in Winston Salem, there, I forget the name of it, but right after the war, when I used to go back to North Carolina, I used to hear Bernard broadcast from this station. [One of the] first Negro, all Negro, stations in, in that area, you know? And there was Julius Michael, and Charles Whitted, his father was the Principal of Leonard Street School, and that type of situation.

**Simpkins:** Was there any clique, was there any formation of cliques in the community?

**Brower:** Well, actually, there was certain sons, certain boys, from certain families--you know, I often used to think about the fact that I, as a, a top student, didn't make the school patrol, but John did. He made it, with the schoolteachers' kids, and a few other boys. It wasn't so much, I mean, I don't know what held me back--in a sense, I've, I've always had my difficulties, even though I've been acknowledged, say, to be a leading student, and all of that--some way, I've always tended to rub people slightly wrong. But John, he was, he's the kind of person that people liked, teachers liked, and he just seemed to have had good training, which is not to say that I had bad training, but there was nothin', nothin' that tended to offend people, you know--he didn't do anything of that nature, see? And I was somewhat jealous because I didn't make the patrol, because it entailed a trip to Washington, during the Spring season, and I remember Coltrane and them makin' that trip, and I'd never even been on a train, and I used to want...

**Simpkins:** When was that trip?

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<sup>22</sup> In an interview with Lewis Porter, Coltrane's classmate and friend **Betty [Leach] Jackson** sought to characterize the Underhill neighborhood as respectable and well-to-do: "Professional people like teachers and doctors lived in that area—that's the type of people John [Coltrane] grew up with." Porter, *Coltrane*, 14. **Mary [Lylerly] Alexander** echoed this description: "One of my teachers lived across the street, so did the dentist. Our next-door neighbor was a doctor, another teacher and the family of another minister also lived on the street." Porter, *Coltrane*, 14. However, an analysis of the 1930 census data provides a rather different picture. Most of the Blair/Coltrane family's closest neighbors lived, as did the Blairs, in extended family arrangements, with multiple breadwinners. Only seven of the Blairs' eleven neighboring households consisted of married couples, and in all but three of these, wives as well as husbands worked. Five of the eleven neighbors took in roomers to help make ends meet (at 119 Underhill, four of ten people in residence were roomers). Several kept elderly parents, or children not their own. Of the twenty-three working-age adults in these eleven homes (excluding the stay-at-home wives), only four could be considered professionals: two dentists; one physician; and one teacher (and two of these four professionals lived as roomers). Just three others were employed in semi-skilled positions: pipe fitter; barber; "hair cutterest." The rest held low paying jobs: cook; house cleaner; truck driver; sales clerk; nurse maid; factory helper; or were unemployed. Department of Commerce. *Fifteenth Census of the United States*. Bureau of the Census, Washington, DC, 1930.

**Brower:** It must have been around, say, when he was in the fifth grade or so.<sup>23</sup>

**Simpkins:** And what qualifications did you [have] to meet?

**Brower:** They just picked you for bein' a school patrol...

**Simpkins:** Patrol boys?

**Brower:** Yeah, Patrol Boys they called it. The job only entailed standin' patrol at street corners, and there was a rail, a railroad crossing, you may have noticed that railroad that went through the city, it's in a sunken area.<sup>24</sup> Well, when we were first goin' to school, it wasn't, it was on [an] even level with the street. Now, actually you've been there since—I haven't been home since sixty-four, and they've done a lot of redevelopment. At that time, it was even with Washington Street, and when you came across, you had to make sure that the trains weren't comin', so one of the patrol boys was to make sure the kids got across these crossings safely.<sup>25</sup> It wasn't all that terribly dangerous, because the train probably only came through town about three or four times a day, you know? But, maybe a little more, see actually High Point, itself, [was] supposed to be the highest point between Washington and Atlanta on the Southern Railroad, so that's how it more or less got its name, see. So, like I say, he made the patrol boys, and he deserved it, in the sense of bein' an outstandin' student, and a very mannerly kid, and like I said, it sort of bein' from Underhill, kept him...

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<sup>23</sup> "An interesting feature of Friday morning's assembly was talks given by each patrol boy who recently went to Washington... The following ten [eleven?] patrol boys went to Washington: Charles S. Whitted (captain), Alvin Holly, John Coltrane, Bernard Baker, Harry Hall, A.D. Reddick, Titus Haywood, Joseph Moore, Clyde Pike, Donald Lindsay, and Thomas Randle." *News of Interest To Colored People: "Leonard Street School News," HPE*, May 21, 1939. In the Spring of 1939, John Coltrane was in the seventh grade.

<sup>24</sup> In 1935, the town of High Point began to make plans to lower the railroad tracks that passed through the central business district. This required that the rail line decline gradually along its eastern approach, as it traveled through the African American neighborhood. Once accomplished, this deep cut effectively severed in two the neighborhood that straddled the tracks. The initial construction plan included only one automobile overpass, the opening of which was long delayed. Thus, African American workers and school children were forced either to climb up and down the steep embankment, or walk long distances to get to their jobs, and to their schools. "May Get \$350,000 Works Progress Funds," *HPE*, October 10, 1935.

<sup>25</sup> "[Leonard Street School Principal] S.S. Whitted thanked the patrol boys for the invaluable services rendered by each of them, especially in assisting smaller children at the tracks depression project." *News of Interest To Colored People: "Leonard Street School News," HPE*, May 21, 1939. Also, Betty Jackson, interviewed by David Tegnell, March 2003:

**David Tegnell:** Do you remember that in the late 1930s the railroad tracks were lowered into a ravine, and that initially no provision was made for pedestrian overpasses? Consequently, people had to crawl down the embankment to get across the tracks.

**Betty Jackson:** Yeah, we had steps, yes. And I remember my daddy fell *down* the steps one night (laughs). Yeah we used to have to go down, cross, the... (laughs), and go down and come up the steps, to go on the other street.

**Mary Alexander:** I climbed up and down those icy steps many a day to Leonard Street School. Personal email from Mary Alexander to David Tegnell, 2004.

In January 1939, the Southern Railroad tore down the steps leading in and out of the cut, making it practically impossible for children to cross the tracks and get to school. On January 3, 1939, William Penn High School Principal Samuel E. Burford and St. Stephen Pastor J.F. Dunn led a delegation of African American citizens before the town council, demanding that something be done. According to the report in the *High Point Enterprise*, Samuel Burford said, "our people refuse to allow their children to risk their lives [any longer]." Reverend Dunn sought to temper Burford's outburst with, "We have taught our people the idea of patience and contentment, and we have not heretofore complained." "School Children Unable To Cross Washington Street," *HPE* January 4, 1939.

**Simpkins:** But you were from Underhill, too.

**Brower:** Yeah, it helped him because—but I mean the Brower family was much more numerous, than, say, Coltrane. Coltrane was like an only--he was definitely an only kid. Mary Lyerly was his cousin,<sup>26</sup> she grew up with him, and was almost like a sister to him, but basically, he was just an only child, and [there] wasn't anything--I mean somehow or another the Brower family being as big as it was--I had about six brothers--I mean, I wouldn't say that any action on anybody else's part should have affected my situation in school, but somehow or another, when you come from a big family, you got a whole lotta people workin' for ya or against ya, in a way, but Coltrane, bein' a single boy, was almost, like, on his own, see. Whatever he did was for himself and nobody else had to affect his life, so like I said, he stood well with the teachers. In those days, like I say, he was a very good student; that's in elementary school years...

**Simpkins:** Was there any cliquishness with regard to people not on Underhill Street?

**Brower:** There was no such thing as social snobbery, you know? But the idea was...

**Simpkins:** Still, it was a good place to be.

**Brower:** If you say you're from Underhill, it sorta indicated that your family had gotten a nice place to live. It wasn't like--see, I remember, for example, Burns Hill--wasn't anything wrong with those people, but it was sorta way out in the woods, like you had to walk through, over, nothin' but dirt roads to get there. And then there was other streets, even like the one that runs parallel to Underhill, Eccles Street.

**Simpkins:** Were the white streets paved?

**Brower:** Well, not exclusively, but much more.

**Simpkins:** What about sidewalks? Did they have sidewalks?

**Brower:** Well, sidewalks, no. In our area, the sidewalk situation was left up to the individual person. The city didn't have anything to do with it.

**Simpkins:** What about for the whites?

**Brower:** I don't know about that. They may have done it, see, because there was, of course, a situation where the whites probably did a lot of things for themselves that we probably weren't even aware of. But I do know, like, say, Miss Parham, who stayed next to the Coltranes, she had her sidewalk paved, but the Coltranes didn't. It was merely the fact that they never got around to doin' it; it wasn't that—most times it was probably they couldn't afford it. A lotta people, just, they didn't do it; they never got around to doin' it. You see, only about ten percent had paved sidewalks. Seemed like, you didn't have a sidewalk, you didn't worry

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<sup>26</sup> Mary Elizabeth Lyerly was born July 23, 1927 at 840 Hoover Street in High Point. Her mother returned briefly to High Point from Jacksonville, Florida to be near her own mother for the birth. For three months, afterward, Mary remained in the care of her maternal grandmother, Alice Virginia Blair, while Bettie returned to Florida. In October, one of Bettie's sisters retrieved Mary and brought her to Jacksonville, where she stayed until she was three years old. From October 1930 until mid-year 1931, Mary again lived briefly with the Coltrane/Blair family in High Point until her mother brought her back to Florida. In February 1933 until mid-year 1935, Bettie and Mary took up temporary residence at 118 Underhill in High Point. During this time, Mary attended first and second grades at Leonard Street School. But Mary's High Point schooling was interrupted for the school year 1935-36, while Bettie and Mary rejoined Mary's father, Goler, in Jacksonville. In the Fall of 1936, Bettie and Mary returned to 118 Underhill, where they resided permanently until 1942. This chronology is derived from a combination of interviews with Mary Alexander published in Porter, *Coltrane*; personal emails between David Tegnell and Mary Alexander, 2004-2005; and public documents obtained by David Tegnell.



about it. So, I don't think that that had much value as far as people's thought was concerned. But I'm sayin' that, actually, you didn't go out and say, well, look, I'm from Underhill, you from Moon Street, and try to be a big shot about it. I'm just sayin' that somehow or another that was an important street, in the sense of a residential street.

**Simpkins:** Do you remember any other incidents, any other situations, or any other things that you all did together?

**Brower:** Well, as I think back, it's just more or less what we were interested in. I can't quite place the period, but we was in our pre-high school period, and we liked to read Doc Savage stories.<sup>27</sup> That's a pulp magazine. And it probably sold for ten cents a copy, and Doc Savage, he was like the head of a gang of guys that were sort of scientific Americans, and their job was to go out and fight evil. No matter where it was. And, of course, they were always up against unusually diabolical forces, and sometimes they would really get jammed up. And he had a couple cohorts there, one of 'em was named Ham and another one was named Monk. Anyhow, we got a great kick outta readin' those stories, because the more unusual their opposition was, the more we liked it. I remember one time, we even tried to duplicate it by composin' a story ourselves. I think John did the drawin'. I think he took some paper, and just folded it over into a book, booklet, like. And I tried to write the story, and Coltrane tried to do the drawing part. And we also liked the Shadow stories.

**Simpkins:** Shadow stories?

**Brower:** Yeah, that was another pulp magazine, called The Shadow. Chief character was a guy named Lamont Cranston, they had him on the radio in the forties, you know, they used to say, "The Shadow knows..."

**Simpkins:** Oh, yeah.

**Brower:** ...what evil lurks in the hearts of man," somethin' like that. That was a pulp magazine, too. So that was our chief, non-school reading during one period.

**Simpkins:** Did you try to duplicate that also?

**Brower:** No, no, we didn't try to do—we didn't go so much for The Shadow, even though we read him, and we knew all about him...

**Simpkins:** Was he a black man, or was he...

**Brower:** No, he was some sort of a professional man, but he had a way, when he got involved in solvin' mysteries, he assumed sort of a shadowy aspect, so that's how he got his name.

**Simpkins:** A shadowy aspect.

**Brower:** But Doc Savage, like I said, Doc himself was a man of brilliant mind; he surrounded himself with brilliant guys, but no matter how brilliant he was, there was always a time when they were in hot water, and they had to figure ways of getting out, and Coltrane and I were intrigued by these stories. As a matter of fact, we were the only kids I knew that read 'em. I know there was another fella there named Willis Hinton, who used to like to read the Wild West stories, but Coltrane and I never did get interested in those, even though I remember Willis and I used to be messin' around with those Western books.

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<sup>27</sup> Doc Savage pulp fiction magazine was published monthly, beginning March 1933, by Street and Smith.  
<http://thepulp.net/docsavage.html>

**Simpkins:** Did you write more than one of those potential stories?

**Brower:** No. I can just remember that one that we, we got around to. I don't think we really finished it, but we did, we were tryin' to come up with somethin' that would, you know, would, uh, you know, place it in the same element as these other stories. You know, we were tryin' to get somethin' unusual, so--because that was the fascinatin' feature of the Doc Savage stories, was the unusual circumstances that these guys come up with. So that's what we were really, really tryin' to bend our thoughts to.

**Simpkins:** Did you spend much time on painting, or drawing?

**Brower:** No, but, uh, we both thought we could draw pretty good. In other words, I would say that, uh, he didn't do any drawin' that, you know, that [we] would take to, like, anybody in the class, that would say, you know, you got a *talent* for it, you know? But just to sit down with a pencil, and try to draw a car, and that type of thing, you know, we could do pretty good, but we didn't have any, uh, we didn't have any real talent, I don't think, that could even have been developed. It's just that we had a--we could draw a face, we could draw a body, you know? And we could draw a car, and try to make it look, uh, you know, unusually streamlined and that type of thing. It was always, we were always-- if our thoughts were towards anything as far as things were concerned, it was always sorta advanced, you know? In other words, uh, futuristic in our, in our thinkin' about things, you know? So, uh, maybe his music situation...

**Simpkins:** Goes along with it, um hmm. Do you know how old you were, at that time? Was it late in pre...

**Brower:** Yeah, it would have to be anywhere up to around twelve or thirteen, maybe twelve, I would say, because he was probably about twelve or thirteen.

**Simpkins:** Was it after his father died?<sup>28</sup>

**Brower:** Yeah, uh huh. And we also read comics. I think the comic strip we liked the best, most liked was, we had an interest in Mandrake, Dick Tracy. Ones like Moon Mullins, and that type, didn't particularly interest us. We was always interested in somethin' involvin' mystery, and solvin' of crime, you know? And, uh, somehow or another, we had the same interest when it came to the movies. I don't recall that John was as much a movie bug as I was, perhaps then again, he was. But I know I used to have to go to the movies every Saturday [for the] cowboy pictures, but I know he musta been goin' because he was interested in certain serials, like he was interested in Flash Gordon. And I remember there was a Dick Tracy serial one time that both he and I got very excited about. One reason, had a guy named Ralph Byrd as the, he was playin' Dick Tracy, and there was a colored fella in town that looked so much like Ralph Byrd.<sup>29</sup> But anyhow,

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<sup>28</sup> John Robert Coltrane died at 9 pm, January 2, 1939, less than three weeks after Reverend Blair passed away. He was probably 43 years old. According to his death certificate, J.R. came under the care of Dr. M.B. Davis for gastric carcinoma on November 23, 1938, but had been diagnosed with the disease as early as 1937. North Carolina State Board of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, *Standard Certificate of Death*. Funeral Services were held January 5 at 2:30 pm at St. Stephen A.M.E. Zion Church and burial at Greenhill Municipal Cemetery in the Blair family plot. News of Interest To Colored People: *HPE*, January 1939. John Robert's name on the simple concrete grave marker is misspelled, "Coldtrane."

<sup>29</sup> Ralph Byrd starred as the lead in three Dick Tracy serials, 1937-1939.

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0126049/>

we followed that series, and there were several others. I guess it was more or less because of the way the pictures would end every week, you know--you gotta come back next week to see what's happenin'. Actually, the stories, themselves—I see these Flash Gordon pictures on television now, and the stories themselves are very sickenin', I mean, in the sense of bein' anything really exciting, but to our young minds, boy, we were really concerned about what's going to happen next week, and we'd be discussing the whole week, what's gonna happen to this guy when he, like, jumped off the mountain on his horse, and last time we seen him the horse was goin' one way and he was goin' another, you know? And you go there the next week, the guy didn't even jump off the mountain.

**Simpkins:** Yeah, yeah. Did you go to church together?

**Brower:** No. That's the one part of our social life that we didn't share. I went to St. Marks.<sup>30</sup>

**Simpkins:** He went to St. Stephen.<sup>31</sup>

**Brower:** That's right and that threw him in connection with certain people. You know, I was aware of that situation, like there was certain families that they had heard of me, the *Browers*, they hadn't heard of *me*, you know, but then, the Coltranes would be somebody *to* them, quite simply because their families knew each other from church, and particularly since his [grand]father had been a minister, and a lotta these older people that I'm talkin' about, they knew Reverend Blair—not his father, but his grandfather.<sup>32</sup> [So] they sorta gave John the big treatment. I mean, I wasn't jealous or anything, but I do remember those type of situation. I get the same thing happenin' in my case, because of my father bein' a big man in our church, whenever I could meet people, and they be start talkin' to me, like, and John would be ignored to a certain extent, and that's because they even didn't hardly know his family. But we didn't go to church together, just, like I said, we just, in our schooling ...

**Simpkins:** How did the other boys look upon John? Did they look upon John as a leader?

**Brower:** Well, no, I wouldn't say so. As far as leadership qualities, I'm tryin' to think, now who, who—like I said, a big guy on the campus...

**Simpkins:** You mean in elementary school.

**Brower:** In elementary school, well, I was, well, actually there was no such thing as a leader. I mean, uh, I would say that, uh, the only, only way to become a leader was by, by, by virtue of the teachers, you know, makin' you the Patrol Boy, or somethin' like that, or maybe for shootin' marbles good, they might get a little

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<sup>30</sup> St. Marks M.E Church, located at 753 E. Washington. *High Point City Directory*, 1940.

<sup>31</sup> St. Stephen A.M.E. Zion church, located at 207 Price St. *High Point City Directory*, 1940.

<sup>32</sup> Rev. William Wilson Blair served as minister of St. Stephen A.M.E. Zion Church in High Point, from 1920-23, before being transferred to Hamlet, North Carolina for the years, 1924-26. Beginning 1927, Rev. Blair served as presiding elder (superintendent), first of the Wadesboro district (1927-29) and then the Greensboro district (1930-31). Subsequently, he stepped down from this post to pastor churches in the southern part of the state at Monroe (1932-33) and Wadesboro, until his death in December 1938. During this twelve-year period (1927-38), Rev. Blair's family lived in High Point and regularly attended St. Stephen. Thus, although John Coltrane grew up in a church closely associated with Rev. Blair, he did not regularly hear his grandfather preach. The preceding chronology is derived from A.M.E. Zion Church records housed at Heritage Hall, Livingstone College, Salisbury, North Carolina, and reports in the *Star of Zion*, the A.M.E. Zion Church weekly newspaper, microfilm copies of which are available in the North Carolina Collection, UNC Libraries, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

reputation. But I don't, I don't remember John bein' hot on marbles, and, uh, even though he played, but he wasn't, uh—or if you was a good wrastler.

**Simpkins:** He was a good wrestler?

**Brower:** No, I say, if you were good, then that might give you a little reputation, but, uh, I don't recall that-- I mean, I know he and I used to do a little wrastlin' in his yard, but, as far as, you know, the whole school lookin' upon us as bein', you know, anything in the way of a, you know, bein' tough or nothin', I can't say.

**Simpkins:** Was he on any teams in elementary school?

**Brower:** No, we didn't have no teams in elementary school.

**Simpkins:** You didn't have a softball team, or...

**Brower:** Yeah, well, we used to play softball and he used to play with us. We--you could always count on him for any type of team sport. I remember we used to--even tried to organize a baseball team, we even played the white boys.

**Simpkins:** Did you beat 'em?

**Brower:** I don't recall what the score was. I know--I remember I used to try to do all the pitchin', but I don't even remember what position John played. He was the type that could catch and he could do anything athletic. He wasn't no real misfit on the athletic field. He was kinda, he wasn't a big fella, but he wasn't smallish, either. He was, I guess in high school he must of weighed about a hundred and fifty pounds, or so, like that. I mean, he took a certain amount of pride in tryin' to be good, without ever gettin' any ideas that he had the makings of any kind of a star. Just that when he was out there, he was hustlin' and tryin' to do good as he could.

**Simpkins:** What was his personality like in elementary school?

**Brower:** Well, in elementary school, like I said, he was just a good mannerly kid. Never...

**Simpkins:** Towards you, though.

**Brower:** Well, towards everybody. In other words, there was nothin'--the teachers couldn't find any fault with him. He was always dressed neatly. Well, his parents never seemed to have suffered too much from the Depression. By that, I mean, bein' an only child, livin' in a house—I don't know what the situation was as far as the mortgage,<sup>33</sup> anything like that—but, bein' from a big family, myself, I knew things were pretty tight in our home, but I never got the impression that John ever wanted for food, or anything like that, see. And I spent an awful lotta

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<sup>33</sup> As pastor of St. Stephen A.M.E. Zion in High Point in 1922, Rev. Blair earned a salary greater than that paid the principal of Leonard Street School in 1930. See Tegnell, "Hamlet," 175. His salary as presiding elder would have been even greater. John Robert Coltrane also contributed to the family's combined income. The Blairs therefore wanted for little. **Betty Jackson:** "I think the Blairs had a phone. They had *everything* we didn't have." Betty Jackson, interviewed by David Tegnell, 2003. The Blairs also owned a player piano (currently in the collection of the High Point Museum). In addition, even after building his own home, Rev. Blair had sufficient disposable income to invest in real estate. On September 15, 1931, Rev. Blair, along with partners E.E. Curtright, and A.F. Parker, purchased lot #15, facing Furlough Street. Guilford County Record of Deeds. However, as the Depression deepened, and as Rev. Blair had to step down from his superintendent's position in 1932, the family had to tighten its belt. Rev. Blair sold the Furlough Street lot, February 3, 1933. And on May 15, 1937, he sold a 5/8 interest in his farm near Edenton, ownership of which he had retained since its purchase in 1883. And in 1937, John Robert Coltrane (perhaps after he was diagnosed with cancer) closed his tailor shop and formed a partnership with fellow tailor Ollie Simmons; the two men reopened at a new location, 700 E. Washington, under the name Piedmont Tailoring Co. *High Point City Directory*, 1937.

time in Coltrane's house--seemed like I was in his house all the time, rather than he was in ours. And I think one of the reasons was that in our house, like I said, we had more people—and he come down, he come down to the house, but like, whenever he come down to the house, was like, we're goin' to the park. Or he come down and, we go right on to the park. And I can remember, like, winter days, after school, I end up at his house. And we be playin' games, did a lot of things, like, I don't remember--little games, like at Christmas time—another indication that his family was able to care, because he was gettin' a lot of little things for Christmas, and whereas—another thing we used like to do when we was very young was skate, and...

**Simpkins:** Rollerskate?

**Brower:** Right. We used to get [unintelligible] a pair of skates called Union Skates—I never will forget the name, and those were the best skates. They just clamp on your shoe. And then we used to skate, and we was very good at skating, and we could do those hills on Underhill. We used to get to the top of 'em and we'd jump up and spin backwards, you know?<sup>34</sup>

**Simpkins:** Backwards down the hill?

**Brower:** And go all the way down the hill like that. Seemed like—I mean those hills don't seem like nothin' to me now, but in those days, to do that, seemed like it was. I can remember a lotta people used to like to skate. I mean, it don't seem like it's a big thing, now, but in those days even the high school kids used to get skates, and I can remember seein' a lot of older people, I mean older girls and boys, and it seemed like a big thing to be skatin' all over town. It's like people ride with a bicycle, now. Yeah, we would skate everywhere. Wherever there were sidewalks, we'd hit it. And like I said, Underhill was a big street for it, because it was paved all the way, and had all these nice hills. So we did do a lot of skating, and that was in our elementary school years. We never had any bikes, so we never did do any bike riding. But we did an awful lot of walkin', particularly on Sundays. On Sundays, after church, we'd get together, before we'd go to the movie at night, and we'd walk through the woods, 'cause there were a lot of wooded areas, at that time, out beyond High Point College. It was a lotta—we'd just be walkin' and talkin'. And we'd walk up through white neighborhoods up Greensboro Road, Montlieu Avenue, I think they call it, all the way up to Main Street, and then we'd hit Main Street, we would walk into the center of town, and we, we didn't think much about white people, in the sense that—there was no oppression, no sense of oppression, you know? I mean, we, we just didn't have anything to do with white people on a social level, but we would go up town, we would mingle with 'em in the department stores. They had the dual fountain

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<sup>34</sup> February 27, 1936, the WPA sponsored one of several skating tournaments that pitted children from the East and South Side African American neighborhoods, i.e., Normal Street vs. Hilltop Street (effectively, Leonard Street School against Fairview Elementary School). Boys and girls separately competed in such events as eagle spread, backward skating, circle skating, fifty-yard dash, and heel and toe. "All winners were given prizes. Franklin Brower was given the special prize." *News of Interest To Colored People: HPE*, March 1, 1936. Through sponsorship of such events, and through the funding of projects like the Colored Municipal Park and the Daniel Brooks Homes, the WPA significantly improved the lives African Americans in High Point and throughout the South. As a consequence, massive numbers of African Americans switched their political allegiance from Republican to Democrat.

system, where colored drink here, the white drink there, but basically, our relationship, as far as dealing with the whites, was as though--was no animosity.<sup>35</sup> Because you—in order to go uptown, and you would go up to a certain street, and then it became white, and some of the biggest houses of the whites were located between that point and uptown.

**Simpkins:** What street was that?

**Brower:** It would be Washington Street. We walked up Washington Street. Then you get up to [Commerce Avenue]--that was the dividin' line, and then you just walk, and then you get up town. There was no such thing as worryin' about etiquette, racial etiquette, or anything like that. But when you went to the movies, you went right on upstairs and didn't think nothin' about it. You wanted a drink of water in the department stores, OK. You wanted to get waited on, you just stood there; you didn't have to defer to the whites or anything, you just—whatever the girl asked you what you want, you told her.

**Simpkins:** But they would serve the whites first?

**Brower:** No, uh, uh. No, I mean, I can't recall it, I don't really recall any real snubs, as far as, to indicate that John and myself had any racial scars, like I said—but *just us*, you know—I mean I do know of certain instances where, like, I mean one time there was a, like a big steam laundry there,<sup>36</sup> where there was over a hundred Negro women working there. And I had an aunt that worked there and every Saturday she used to take me to the movies. Well, I remember one time I went in this restaurant,<sup>37</sup> right next to this place—now, that's where a lot of the women ate at lunchtime. But most of 'em didn't eat in there. You know, they go in and get you a hamburger or somethin' and [you] take it out. So, I just happened one time, I remember, I just decided to sit down in there for some reason, but I sat up, like, up front; I done been in this place so *many* times, you know? I was just a kid, so didn't actually go in there and, say, order me a platter. Whenever I went in there, was for, like, somethin' I could eat out. But this particular time, I don't know why, I decided to sit down. The woman told me, said, "No, you can't sit here, you have to sit back there." I never will forget that incident.

**Simpkins:** What music did you hear around that time?

**Brower:** Well, first songs that I think John and I got any excited about were, they built this park out in our end of town,<sup>38</sup> and by that time, Ella Fitzgerald came out with

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<sup>35</sup> Historian Grace Elizabeth Hale writes in her book, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York, Vintage Books, 1998): "White [Southern] business men would remain to varying degrees dependent upon black customers and rarely found it profitable to exclude blacks from the emerging spaces of consumer culture. (p. 143). She argues that it was easier to segregate public restrooms and water fountains because these "offered nothing for sale." (p. 186). By contrast, "sites of shopping—the buildings that housed dry goods, drug, clothing, and shoe stores and five-and-dimes—never wore segregation signs." (p. 189). White commercial interest, then, trumped the need to maintain racial separation, and ultimately helped to undermine the regime.

<sup>36</sup> The High Point Steam Laundry was located at 228-232 N. Wrenn. *High Point City Directory, 1942-43*.

<sup>37</sup> Presumably, Franklin is referring to the DeLuxe Sandwich Shop, located at 238 N. Wrenn. *High Point City Directory, 1942-43*.

<sup>38</sup> The Colored Municipal Park, located at 1100 Edmonson, opened June 11, 1938. Construction was funded "principally by the Federal Works Progress Administration." The Park included a "new playground...a 50-meter swimming pool, together with a modern bath house and other bathing equipment, baseball fields, tennis courts, a wading pool and many other recreational facilities." "City Will Dedicate \$100,000 Negro

“A-Tisket, and A-Tasket,” and Jimmie Lunceford had “Margie.”<sup>39</sup> And they used to play these songs on the jukebox out at the park.<sup>40</sup>

**Simpkins:** Was it a carnival kind of thing? Was it an amusement park?

**Brower:** Yeah, it was an amusement park. In other words, it had a swimmin’ pool, and...

**Simpkins:** We could go there? Or was it segregated?

**Brower:** No, this was strictly for the colored people.

**Simpkins:** And what about the movies, could you, did you have to sit in a certain section of the movies?

**Brower:** Oh. Yeah. Umm, hmm. Yeah.

**Simpkins:** Upstairs or downstairs...

**Brower:** Well, we sat upstairs, and had about four theaters there. Two of ’em had galleries, for the Negroes.<sup>41</sup>

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Park in Ceremony On Next Friday,” *HPE*, June 5, 1938. Prior to the opening of the Park, African Americans in High Point, as elsewhere throughout the South, were forbidden from gathering in public places. In many Southern cities, African Americans were required to obtain a pass from employers in order to justify their presence in white neighborhoods. Thus African Americans’ movements were largely restricted to segregated areas, and they could not congregate except in churches and schools. Upon its opening, High Point’s Colored Municipal Park proved extremely popular, and the envy of surrounding towns. On Labor Day 1939 “three to five thousand” people thronged the Park. “People were not only there from High Point, but picnics from Winston-Salem, Sanford, Salisbury, and Greensboro were held there. From Winston-Salem alone came sixteen huge buses packed with picnickers and a large number of automobiles ... This writer heard many of the visitors compliment High Point on the outlay and facilities of the park, while bemoaning the fact that their cities were not similarly equipped.” News of Colored People: *HPE*, September 9, 1939.

<sup>39</sup> Chick Webb and his Little Chicks (with Ella Fitzgerald on vocals) recorded “A-Tisket, A-Tasket” May 2, 1938, and Jimmie Lunceford and His Orchestra recorded “Margie” January 6, 1938. It appears that the jukeboxes at The Park were up-to-date. Brian Rust, *Jazz Records, 1897-1942*, (Chigwell, Essex, England, Storyville Publications, 1982) (Hereinafter Rust, *Jazz Records*). Coltrane’s community band mate **John Ingram** told J.C. Thomas, “He played a version of ‘Margie’ that I swear was just as fine as Jimmy Lunceford’s.” J.C. Thomas, *Chasin’ the Trane: The Music and Mystique of John Coltrane*, (New York, Da Capo, 1975).

<sup>40</sup> “The small wooden main structure that housed the swimming pool had two open patio areas on each side of the second floor, overlooking acres of green grass. There were two baseball diamonds on the upper level, a baby pool, swing sets and jungle gyms. The lower level had tennis courts, a basketball court and a brick structure with two massive fireplaces for cookouts. On both sides of the center section were two large outdoor patios with jukeboxes that belted out the latest and greatest songs. Five cents for one song was all it took to keep the joint jumping. [Young men] would stand around with that one nickel in their pocket, eyes peeled, waiting on that special young lady to walk through the door so you could slow dance.” Glenn R. Chavis, “Remembering a place we called ‘The Park,’ *Greensboro News and Record*, January 26, 2003.

<sup>41</sup> The Broadhurst and Paramount Theatres (located at 325 N. Main and 203 S. Wrenn, respectively) each included a colored balcony that may have been open to African Americans only a few nights a week, and may have been closed to African Americans altogether **during the summer when** whites sought respite from the heat in air-conditioned theaters. “The colored balcony of the Paramount Theatre will begin its fall schedule today with the present picture. It will be open hereafter every Monday, Wednesday and Friday.” News of Interest To Colored People: *HPE*, October 29, 1936. At least on the weekends, these theaters alternated film screenings with stage shows that sometimes featured actors in black face, such as “Slim Farley, The Master of Burnt Cork,” or “‘See Bee’ Hayworth and his Vaudeville Plays.” On occasion, an entire theatre was opened to African American Patrons, as occurred Friday, May 24, 1935, but only at 11:30 PM. News of Interest to Colored People: *HPE*, May 23, 1935. Although African Americans sometimes had to endure demeaning minstrel shows, they were occasionally compensated by the chance to see films of Paul Robeson or the Nicholas Brothers. John Coltrane apparently took note of such occasions and commemorated them in his fifth grade Negro History scrapbook, which he submitted to his school’s

**Simpkins:** The other two, you couldn't go up there.

**Brower:** The other two. Then, eventually, they built a fifth one, which was really, became a sort of palatial one. They didn't even build a section for the Negroes there. What they would usually have to do, say a big picture, with Errol Flynn, Clark Gable, some big star like that, they would show it at the Centre—that was their new theater, the Centre Theater—they would show it there—maybe a whole week sometime, dependin' on how big the picture was—and then on Sunday, they would hold it over for the Paramount. And the Paramount you had to walk way up to the gal—I mean, this was really way up, you know? And then we would go see those pictures on Sunday, and this would usually be our Sunday night amusement, to go to the Paramount.<sup>42</sup>

**Simpkins:** What other music was heard around that time? Just around the time that he was in—you were in elementary school.

**Brower:** Well, let's see, now, we finished our elementary school in thirty-nine, but we didn't have that much interest—I know we used to wake up in the morning, right before we go to school, and on the local station there, they had a program—about the only way we absorbed any music,<sup>43</sup> and...

**Simpkins:** Would it be jazz?

**Brower:** Well, it would be a mixture.

**Simpkins:** Gospel? Would it be gospel?

**Brower:** No, no gospel. It would be strictly popular music, and I would say that in our elementary school years, except for those two songs that I mentioned, I don't, I can't recall anything that we even got excited about. But then later, after we got to high school, we were beginning to develop an interest in, say, Glenn Miller, Harry James, I know we used to like to listen to "You Made Me Love You," and "Flight of the Bumblebee," by Harry James, and all of the Glenn Miller stuff, "Chattanooga Choo Choo," and stuff like that. Then I remember there was one piece by Artie Shaw—I just can't think of it—and Charlie Barnet, Tommy

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annual contest during Negro History Month, February 1935. John Coltrane's mother preserved this scrapbook, which Mary Alexander sold at auction, February 20, 2005. The scrapbook is now in the collection of the High Point Museum.

<sup>42</sup> Brower does not mention the opening of the Ritz Theatre at 715 E. Washington Street, August 30, 1939. "under the management of the Bijou Operating company...the largest chain of colored theatres in the country." *News of Interest to Colored People: HPE*, August 27, 1939. While the Ritz routinely presented movies that were 2-3 years old, it also screened current newsreels about African Americans and musical shorts. Thus John Coltrane was afforded the opportunity to see musicians he could otherwise only have heard on the radio or on record. In addition, the newsreels provided a glimpse of a world rarely seen by High Pointers. Except when it reported on Negroes' crimes, the white-owned *High Point Enterprise* printed news only of High Point African Americans, and this relegated to a single, occasional column titled "News of Interest to Colored People." **Mary Alexander** says that after the Ritz opened, High Point's "very few of us went to the segregated theaters as often as we once did." Personal email from Mary Alexander to the author, April 11, 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Clear channel radio broadcasts from large Northern cities were available in High Point, but only in the evening. Of course, most Southern African Americans could not afford a radio. 1930 census takers noted that neither the Blairs nor the Browers yet owned a radio. Department of Commerce. *Fifteenth Census of the United States*. Bureau of the Census, Washington, DC, 1930.



Dorsey, all, just the big name bands, you know. I think very little Duke Ellington—type music was played on those stations.<sup>44</sup>

**Simpkins:** Was Count Basie played much?

**Brower:** No, Count Basie was, hardly. Louis Armstrong; I remember they used--one song they used to play of his that Coltrane and I liked was, “Old Man Mose Kicked the Bucket.”<sup>45</sup> I don’t [recall] whether or not that was the title of it, but that was the big line, and Louis, that was one of the first songs we heard by Louis Armstrong.

**Simpkins:** They didn’t play that much of him or Jimmie Lunceford.

**Brower:** No, no. They played a lot of Jimmie Lunceford, I mean, Chick Webb they played, but I can’t recall the titles, you know? I guess to a certain extent they played Ellington. Cab Calloway, I remember, “Hi-De-Hi-De-Ho,”<sup>46</sup> and I was well aware of that. I’m pretty sure John listened to that type of stuff, too. But [there] was very little race music, per se. But I will say that, when we started goin’ to dances, say, not big dances, but group dances, among our group, you know, the kids--we never went to a dance where you had to pay money to dance to, say, a big orchestra--well, we had our little dances, I think the big songs that we liked to dance to were, like, “After Hours,” Avery Parrish, and then we particularly liked Billy Eckstine’s “Jelly, Jelly.”<sup>47</sup> Those kinda songs, you get a girl and kinda, you know, hug her tight, and dance pretty good to, you know? But the big bands, Lunceford and those guys, when they would come down and make personal appearances, [unintelligible] they’d come to High Point, would be Greensboro. I remember Reese Dupree used to book ’em, down that area, and the older people, not even high school kids, but people that’s already out of school in their twenties and thirties, they would go over to Greensboro, and pay the buck-fifty or buck seventy-five, whatever it was, you know, sometimes I would hear ‘em talkin’ about those things, I used to wonder what it was like to see these guys in person, not so much to dance, but just to see ‘em, you know?<sup>48</sup>

**Simpkins:** What effect did the death of his father have on him?

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<sup>44</sup> Harry James and His Orchestra recorded “Flight of the Bumblebee” February 13, 1941, and “You Made Me Love You (I Didn’t Want to Do It),” May 20, 1941; Glenn Miller recorded “Chattanooga Choo Choo” for RCA, May 7, 1941. Rust, *Jazz Records*, 817-818 and

<sup>45</sup> Louis Armstrong recorded “Old Man Mose,” November 21, 1935. Rust, *Jazz Records*, p.52.

<sup>46</sup> Cab Calloway and His Orchestra recorded “Minnie the Moocher,” December 18, 1933.

<sup>47</sup> Erskine Hawkins and His Orchestra (featuring Avery Parrish on piano) recorded “After Hours,” June 10, 1940; Earl Hines and His Orchestra (featuring Billy Eckstine on vocals) recorded “Jelly, Jelly,” December 2, 1940. Brian Rust, *Jazz Records*, p. 761. Sadie Greenwood, daughter of a private piano teacher in High Point, performed “After Hours” at the 1942 William Penn High School Prom. “Junior Senior Prom Was Gala Affair,” *Students’ Pen*, May 22, 1942.

<sup>48</sup> Big bands rarely performed in High Point. In fact, the only documented appearance was that of Blanche Calloway, July 4, 1934 at the United Warehouse. Colored News: *HPE*, May 31 and July 3, 1934. Mostly, fans had to travel to nearby Winston Salem or Greensboro to hear bands. Cab Calloway played Pepper’s Warehouse in Winston Salem, August 20, 1934. Colored News, *HPE*, August 21, 1934. On May 14, 1941, Andy Kirk and His Clouds of Joy (featuring “the petite Mary Lou Williams as pianist”) performed at the Sedgefield Skating Rink, midway between High Point and Greensboro. The *High Point Enterprise* reported that “Andy Kirk is the biggest name band ever to play for a local colored dance.” Colored News: *HPE*, May 12 and 14, 1941. Simpkins incorrectly wrote that Ella Fitzgerald and Jimmie Lunceford performed at a bandstand at the Colored Municipal Park. C.O. Simpkins, *Coltrane*, 6. Likewise, Porter erroneously reported that Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald performed at the Kilby Hotel Arcade. *Porter*, *Coltrane*, 27.

**Brower:** Well, he was so young at that time, that, uh, even I don't, don't recall, you know? I don't know whether anybody mentioned the fact that his father—what did it say about his father, that he...?

**Simpkins:** That his father died when he was 12 years old.

**Brower:** Twelve? Uh huh.

**Simpkins:** And that, well, you know, he was a tailor, and was doin' well—doin' very well—the tailor, and that, uh, described him as a short, brown-skinned man, neat dresser.

**Brower:** Alright, did they tell you he drinks?

**Simpkins:** Yeah. Told me he drank a little bit. Was it a little or a lot?

**Brower:** Well, I would say that, uh, he had a reputation for bein' sorta, you know, a moderate drinker, I guess you could say. I would, I would, I would never say I saw him staggerin' drunk, or anything like that. I—my own impression is that I remember him supposed to be, you know, a drinker, you know? That's why I mentioned it.

**Simpkins:** Well, how was that considered in that community—drinkin'?

**Brower:** Well, it didn't have—I don't know, I was so young at that time that I can't say that it had any--that I know how anybody felt. In other words, I was (recording interrupted). It didn't, it didn't, it didn't have much bearing on how you, how your family was regarded, you know? In other words, I would say, overridin' thing in Coltrane's case was that it's—he belonged to the Blair family, and that, uh, Mr. Coltrane had a, had a business, which was unusual in the city, you know?

**Simpkins:** It was unusual for a...

**Brower:** Yeah, it wasn't that, well, cleanin' type businesses—and, when you say he was a tailor, he had a cleanin' establishment.

**Simpkins:** Yeah, that's right, that's right.

**Brower:** Uh huh. But I guess he mended clothes, but even then, the average person in town was like, say, you worked for the white people. They had factories there—it was known as the furniture center of the South. It was big hosiery mill center.

**Simpkins:** We worked in the factories.

**Brower:** Yeah, and that type of work. But very few people had their own—even the grocery stores in the Negro neighborhoods was largely run by whites. There was few people that set up their little stores, but the [Millpass?] family and a few other whites, they had stores scattered throughout the, uh, black section, and that's where most of the people did their tradin'. But, uh, in the area of havin' your clothes cleaned, and so forth, they had the big laundries for the shirts, and things like that—the regular household stuff. But there were two or three shops of this type that, uh, Mr. Coltrane had.

**Simpkins:** He had two or three?

**Brower:** No! I mean...

**Simpkins:** He had one.

**Brower:** He had one, yeah, and, uh, located up on High Street, there, big two-story wooden buildin'. Mr. Hoover, undertaker, had a part of the first floor. The, uh, this man—Mr. Coltrane, and Simmons, man named Simmons--had the other part. Now, most I remember, even though I was so tight with John, is that I, I never had any relation with his father, like I did with his mother. In other words, I could

remember seein' Mr. Coltrane out walkin' and so forth, but, uh, somehow or another, it wasn't as though I ever was at the house, and we sat down and had any conversation. Only thing, I'm rather surprised that John was twelve when he died, but that made me thirteen. Well, I'm actually a year older than John.

**Simpkins:** He died in thirty-nine

**Brower:** Thirty-nine?

**Simpkins:** So he musta been 12 or 13.

**Brower:** Mm hmm, yeah, well...I, I couldn't quite place when that happened.

### High School

**Simpkins:** We were going to talk about high school, now. What happened in high school?

**Brower:** Well, like I say, we finished Leonard Street, thirty-nine, and then started off in high school—tryin' to remember the first years there—pretty much routine. Coltrane and I, we'd gotten older, now, and we still loved to talk—that was our big thing between us, bein' able to just talk, and [we] wasn't always together. We was with other guys, like the drugstore—we used to hang outside the drugstore up on Washington Street—and pretty soon, other people would drift up, and we'd just, you'd just be talkin'...

**Simpkins:** What'd you talk about?

**Brower:** Well, it's hard to say, hard to recall, I mean, be a lotta stuff about girls, not so much that we, at that early...

**Simpkins:** Same thing I used to talk about.

**Brower:** That's right, I mean anything can happen, you know, talkin' 'bout the teachers and... We never discussed what we were gonna do in life, too much, we talk about cars—that's another thing Coltrane and I had a big hangup on, discussing the make of cars, how they looked. We weren't concerned about mechanical, mechanical aspects of cars—I still don't know how to drive (I guess Coltrane went to, got to messin' around with a car—in those days, he didn't have any interest in a car)—but we liked to look at the magazines, and study the models, and try to draw streamlined cars—that's another thing we used to do, try to see who could draw the most *streamlined* cars...<sup>49</sup>

**Simpkins:** This was in high school.

**Brower:** Yeah, well, this held over from my elementary days. I would say this is, probably, our late elementary days, tryin' this, 'cause seemed like as we got in high school, [we] kinda drifted away from the same interests. Seemed like I began to get interested in, say, sports figures. But John never had any interest in sports

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<sup>49</sup> Very few African Americans in High Point could afford to buy a car. Nearly everyone walked to work or school. Rev. Blair owned an "old Essex," which he used to tour his church districts and to commute to-and-from High Point. Personal email from Mary Alexander to David Tegnell, July 4, 2003. And seemingly Bettie and Goler Lyerly also owned a car, which allowed them to travel back and forth between High Point and Jacksonville, Florida. The carport attached to the house at 118 Underhill, almost unique among houses on that street, attests to these families' unusual circumstances, in this regard. John Coltrane apparently carried his childhood interest in streamlined cars into adulthood; the success of *A Love Supreme* enabled him to purchase a Jaguar XKE. [http://thecoltranehome.org/home-photos/home-photos-now/coltrane\\_home\\_2\\_-\\_72/](http://thecoltranehome.org/home-photos/home-photos-now/coltrane_home_2_-_72/)

figures. I used to tell you every name of every baseball player that was in the major leagues, and used to follow the football season, and basketball--anything pertainin' to sports, I was up on. But John didn't have that interest.

**Simpkins:** What was he interested in?

**Brower:** Well, he didn't seem to develop many interests, during this period, before he became interested in music, and, I mean, I can't pin him down as bein' interested in anything that he and I shared, you know? Like I said, another fellow, this fella named Kinzer--have you run across [James] Kinzer?<sup>50</sup>

**Simpkins:** Yeah.

**Brower:** Have you talked to him?

**Simpkins:** Not yet.

**Brower:** Yeah, well, he and I and Coltrane came up from North Carolina, together.<sup>51</sup> But, "Poche" [pronounced Poshay], as I call him; that's what, that's his nickname—Kinzer.

**Simpkins:** Poche? How do you spell that?

**Brower:** Probably something like, P-O, P-O-U-C-H-E.

**Simpkins:** Why did you call him that?

**Brower:** Well, there was a guy in town named Poche. For some reason, he was a, he had a restaurant, and that's all I can remember [unintelligible] start callin' him Poche.

**Simpkins:** What'd you call John?

**Brower:** Nothin'. I mean, he never had a nickname. Yeah, just Coltrane or John. I always called him John. I mean, nobody ever called him by his last name, except, probably discussin', I might say Coltrane, rather than John, while talkin'. But he never had a nickname like this name "Trane" that they gave him, that's somethin' strictly from his musical years up here. But he never had a nickname, like my nickname was "Snooky," and even a lotta people never called ...

**Simpkins:** Did he call you that?

**Brower:** No, he never called me that. That was just, like, the family called me that, and the neighbors called me that—I mean, my high school friends, didn't nobody ever called me that. But Coltrane never had a name like that. But like I said, Poche was very interested in athletics, and John would participate—I'm tryin' to remember whether or not John ever went out for the football team.<sup>52</sup> But I do know that he just didn't have any interest in sittin' around, talkin' about All-American football

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<sup>50</sup> In 1939, James Kinzer lived at 305 Underhill with his mother, Flossie. *High Point City Directory, 1939*. Subsequently, he moved into the Daniel Brooks homes, #58D. "Directory of Seniors," *Students' Pen*, May 21, 1945. Kinzer served as sports editor of the William Penn High School newspaper, and won letters for his contributions to both the basketball and football teams. "Editor Is Backed By Competent Reportorial Staff," *Students' Pen*, May 21, 1943.

<sup>51</sup> June 1943. Porter, *Coltrane*, 21.

<sup>52</sup> John Coltrane joined the football team for the first time in the Spring of 1942 (in anticipation of the Fall season). "Coach Stark Conducts Spring Drills; See Many New Faces," *Students' Pen*, May 22. Coltrane may have been pressed into service, because the team had lost several members to graduation and the military draft. But since the school band performed at football games, it would have been impossible for him to participate in both activities. Thus, Coltrane may have dropped out of the William Penn High School band his senior year. He is listed as a band member neither in the May 21, 1943 issue of the *Students' Pen*, nor in a contemporaneous *High Point Enterprise* article listing all 25 band members (in which Robert Simpson is listed as the only saxophonist). "Band Is Growing In Size And Ability," *Students' Pen*, May 21, 1943; *News of Colored People: HPE*, April 11, 1943.

players, what they gon' do at Duke this year, what kinda team Carolina's gonna have. We wasn't interested so much in the Negro colleges' teams, as we were in those white teams like Duke, and Carolina, and Wake Forest. But John, I can't recall ever, him ever getting too much interested in that. Matter of fact, John never even talked about goin' to college, which was a big thing on Poche and my mind, and, I don't know why, because at that time, we was finishing school, and it became quite a serious matter, tryin' to pick what college to go to. Now, I will say that, like I said, John, as a student, he sort of drifted back, stayed in the pack, and he seemed to have been satisfied with bad marks, but [tape gap] I don't know whether the death of his grandmother had much influence on him in that way or not.<sup>53</sup>

**Simpkins:** When did she die?

**Brower:** 'Cause like I said, she was a sort of hidden influence. I know she was in the house, and John had a lot of respect for her, and all of that, and I always seemed to have thought that, somehow or another, somethin' happened, that [he] didn't feel impelled to be a standout anymore. As a high elementary school student, I guess they sorta pushed on him, not pushed, but I mean, impressed on him to do his studying, and make sure, with clarity, toe the mark and everything.<sup>54</sup> He didn't get outta hand in high school, at all, even though he did begin to sli—begin to run around with girls, as mu—he didn't run around with 'em--I mean, get 'em on his mind more. First girl that I can remember Coltrane bein' particularly interested in was a girl named Doreatha Nelson.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> John Coltrane certainly knew that his family could not afford college tuition. Following the deaths of Rev. Blair (December 11, 1938), John Robert Coltrane (January 1939), and Goler Lyerly (October 25, 1940), Alice Coltrane and Bettie Lyerly (and their two children) were left without a male breadwinner. Other than the Underhill house, and a partial interest in a farm in Chowan County, none of these men left an estate. Upon her death in April 1939, Coltrane's grandmother Alice Virginia Blair willed the Underhill house and Chowan County farm to her seven children. As executor of the will, Alice Coltrane persuaded her siblings to hold off selling the house in exchange for her assumption of the mortgage, tax, and insurance burdens and payment of funeral and medical expenses. See Guilford County Superior Court Docket #9914 (May 8, 1939, June 17, 1940, August 18, 1941, October 5, 1942, and December 28, 1943). Had these heirs not agreed to this arrangement, Alice, Bettie, John and Mary would have been plunged into poverty. As it was, both Bettie and Alice had to take jobs as maids at Emerywood Country Club, located at the end of Hillcrest Dr., and to share their house with a succession of boarders. One of these boarders, Flossie Wilson, a typist, is listed in the 1940 *High Point City Directory*. Mary Alexander remembers Flossie Wilson, and recalls that "there were others," as well. Personal email from Mary Alexander to the author, August 7, 2004.

<sup>54</sup> The demands of their jobs at the country club no doubt made it more difficult for Alice Coltrane and Bettie Lyerly to supervise their children's schoolwork and free time.

<sup>55</sup> Doreatha Nelson lived with her mother Della, a maid, at 406 Cliffside, the older of High Point's two African American neighborhoods, located south and west of Underhill. Doreatha attended Fairview Elementary School, and so probably did not meet John Coltrane until eighth grade. Porter quotes classmate **Rosetta [Cousar] Haywood** as saying that Doreatha Nelson "was probably even smarter than he [John Coltrane] was." Porter, *Coltrane*, 19. Doreatha was one of six sixth grade students to make the Fairview Honor Roll. News of Colored People: *HPE*, May 19, 1938. In her junior year at William Penn High School, she "made the highest scholastic average of any student" that year, despite "taking part in many extra curricular activities." News of Interest to Colored People: *HPE*, May 24, 1942. That same year, Doreatha performed in the high school's production of Walter Ben Hare's play "The Hoo-doo." Thomas Smith, reviewing the production for the *High Point Enterprise*, wrote: "Doreatha Nelson cast as a beautiful maid with a flair for flirting with the guest turned in [an] excellent performance." News of Colored People: *HPE*,

**Simpkins:** This is in his junior year, when he began interested in...

**Brower:** Yes, uh huh, he sort of dropped it on me one night, he was sayin', "You know, I know somebody that like you." And so I say, "Who?" So he was tellin' me, "Doreatha," you know? But I knew he liked her, because he'd already *told* me he *liked* her, but in a different sorta way. But for some reason, he wanted to play a *game* with me about the girl, you know? But I guess I had indicated to him that *I* liked her, too, so [I] didn't indicate that I was gonna make any play for her. So he began to say, well, look, I'm gonna tell her you like her, so I was beggin' him not to. I don't know whether he was serious about it or not, he didn't tell. Eventually, they did have a little fling, but...

**Simpkins:** Little fling...

**Brower:** Yeah, when I say that, I mean, they did go together, but, when I say they went together, it was sorta like—it didn't become a, a real, well, I wouldn't say a hot romance—but there wasn't no such a things in those days—I mean, you become involved with a girl in high school, and you take her home, and, you might go to a movie with her. But mostly, it would be a case of walkin' a girl home. And then if you got bold enough, you drop by her house, on a Sunday afternoon, or somethin' like that, and if her mother liked you well enough, you could stay around and talk to her awhile. So he did get involved with her to a certain extent, but it didn't hold out to the extent that they really said, well, we're for each other, we're not gon' mess around with nobody else. Actually, *she* didn't mess around with anybody else, but in other words, she was still available to whoever, whoever wanted her, because Coltrane, somehow or another, didn't really push it. But that was the, really, first girl that, *only* girl in high school I can remember, of the bunch there that Coltrane really had a real feelin' for, that I can recall. But he did branch out. There was another girl named Ruth Hiatt.<sup>56</sup> Now, she was older than John—well, couple years—and she was always kinda out of our circle. So I always sorta looked upon that as, as a sort of a step in a different direction, as far as lookin' for girls, settin' up a romance with girls, because, it meant that he wasn't just operatin' with somebody that he was familiar with, and so forth. And he used to go down—she lived on a house down on Day Street, which is an offshoot of Underhill—and he—right across the street from what was known as Dan Gray Spring. I, we used to be hanging around Dan Gray Spring--first thing I know, John would be over on her porch. And he'd be over there talkin', and so, we used

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April 1, 1942. And at year's end, Doreatha's fellow students voted her best actress, as well as most studious girl, and most polite girl. "Junior Class Superlatives," *Student's Pen*, May 22, 1942. But Doreatha Nelson did not complete her senior year of high school. On September 19, she took and passed a federal examination that qualified her for a junior clerk position in Washington, DC. Doreatha was immediately offered the job and left school in January 1943. "Clerks, Typists Are Needed by Government," *HPE*, May 9, 1943; "Several Seniors Are Now In Federal Work," *Students' Pen*, May 21, 1943. Before withdrawing from school, in the Fall 1942, Doreatha Nelson was elected Homecoming Queen. "Hectic And Exciting Junior Year Highlights Senior Class History," *Student's Pen*, May 21, 1943.

<sup>56</sup> Ruth Hiatt and her sister Naomi lived with Anna Hiatt at 1200 Crawford. One year older than Coltrane, Ruth graduated in May 1942. Her senior classmates voted Ruth most polite girl and best girl singer. "Superlatives of the Senior Class," *Students' Pen*, May 22, 1942. The 1942 *High Point City Directory* indicates that Anna, Ruth and Naomi Hiatt all worked as maids. Seemingly, Ruth worked while also attending school. After graduation, Ruth and Naomi left for jobs in New York City. News of Colored People: *HPE*, June 7, 1942.

to be kiddin', "Now, what you findin' so much to talk to about to the girl?" As though a guy couldn't talk to a girl [but] about five minutes, and that'd be it. And he'd get over there and get involved in quite a long conversation with Ruth. And Ruth was a pretty nice person, I mean, nice lookin', in a way, and so forth, so—like I said, to me, that was indication that John wasn't just playin' around anymore, I mean, the idea that he would go out and get himself involved with some girl that was altogether out of our circle. See, Doreatha, she was in our class and stuff, and so it wasn't exactly the same type of thing. But, somewhere along the line, they began to have little Friday night parties. That's after Miss [Mrs.] Coltrane left High Point.<sup>57</sup> And John became pretty, pretty free, and, there was a guy named Martin, I remember, Robert Davis, Harry Hall;<sup>58</sup> they all used to get together for Friday night parties, and I don't know [what] would, could happen in those cases, and my imagination, which would be tellin' me certain things must have happened. But I do know they did a lot of drinking, so I think that's John's first introduction to...<sup>59</sup>

**Simpkins:** That was like in late high school?

**Brower:** That was the last year of high school. His mother wasn't there anymore.

**Simpkins:** When did she leave?

**Brower:** Well, she must have left for... either while we were juniors or seniors, 'cause...probably while we were seniors, she came up this way [North]. I don't know, I always wondered whether it was Newark, or...Newark seemed pretty far from Philadelphia, but she didn't have no objection to John comin' to Philadelphia to live. And I'd just say, well—I used to think about it later—I said, gee, was it Newark that she was in? 'Cause when you came to Philadelphia, she, he didn't live with her, 'cause she was, like, workin' on the, livin' on the lot--domestic work, I think she was doin'. So, she was livin' with the family that she was workin' for. So John came up, he didn't have any real place to stay, but

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<sup>57</sup> The exact departure date of Coltrane's mother remains uncertain. It seems likely that she left early in 1942, hoping to take advantage of the wartime demand for workers in the North, following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Mary Alexander says that Alice left during John Coltrane's junior year in high school. Personal email from Mary Alexander to David Tegnell, August 30, 2004. Another anecdote told by Mary Alexander suggests a later departure date, perhaps Spring 1942. Mary told Porter that Coltrane's mother was present when her son was injured playing football. We know that Coltrane played on the William Penn team only during his senior year, but he could have been injured during Spring practice, while still a junior. Porter, *Coltrane*, 20.

<sup>58</sup> Coltrane may have met William "Red" Martin while playing on the high school football team. Both responded to the coach's summons for new players, Spring 1942. Coltrane had known Harry Hall since elementary school (Hall is depicted in Coltrane's third grade class picture, included in Porter, *Coltrane*, following p. 174.). Harry Hall served as advertising manager for the *Student's Pen* during his senior year. Robert Davis beat out William Martin and Doreatha Nelson (who finished a distant second) to be elected Senior Class President for 1942-43. Davis also served as circulation manager for *The Students' Pen*, 1942-43. "Brower To Edit the Pen Next Year," and "Davis Gains Presidency of Student Body," *Students' Pen*, May 22, 1942. In 1943, Robert Davis lived in the Daniel Brooks Homes, #55E with his mother Ola Davis, a maid; Harry Hall lived at 1208 Day Street with his father, Frank Hall, a shipping handler for Briggs Manufacturing; William Martin lived at 133 Underhill with the Charles Drake family (owners of Drake Confectionary). "Directory of Seniors," *Students' Pen*, May 21, 1943; and *High Point City Directory*, 1942-43.

<sup>59</sup> Porter suggests that Coltrane's drinking at these parties may have set the stage for his later problems with substance abuse. Porter, *Coltrane*, 21, 61.

luckily, I had an aunt that knew of a place in her building. So, he and Poche, they were able to get that place.

**Simpkins:** That was in forty-three?

**Brower:** Yeah, that was in forty-three. You might make note of [the] fact that one fella that went to high school at the time we did, and was sort of looked up [to] by everybody, including Coltrane, a fella named Carl Chavis.<sup>60</sup> Now, he was a—Carl had everything goin' for him, he was...I don't know whether you're familiar with the Chavis's of North Carolina, but seems like there's a bunch of people—any time they got the name Chavis, there's a physical attractiveness about 'em, certain complexion, you know?

**Simpkins:** Light skinned?

**Brower:** Yeah, light skinned. Not white lookin'. They, their skin is reddish, and their hair isn't white hair, but it's sort of curly-like, and the girls' hair isn't long and fluffy, brown, it's just heavy, dark, hair. So there was Annie Chavis, and I think Carl had an older brother, and there was a sister that was older than Annie, who was about a year behind us in school, but not only was he a handsome chap, very—beautiful smile—he was a big guy—and he weighed a hundred and eighty—and he was one of the first life-guards out at the park, after they opened it up. And then in high school, he was a football hero, and a basketball star. And he was smart enough to get through class. And then, after he finished William Penn, he went to Morgan. That was at the time when Eddie Hurt was turnin' out almost unbeatable teams, down at Morgan, and if you was goin' to Morgan, that meant you was goin' to, like, Notre Dame, you know? So he spent--he had one or two years at Morgan, playin' for 'em, Chavis did.

**Simpkins:** Did he know John very well?

**Brower:** Yeah, umm hmm.

**Simpkins:** I should check him out, then.

**Brower:** Well, it, the only thing, he's dead, now. He went to Morgan, and he had a couple good years as a football player, then he went into the service, then he got killed while in the service, so they named the—people at Morgan thought well enough of him, they named their gymnasium after him, Carl Chavis Gymnasium. Like I said, it wasn't that he had any direct influence on John's life or anything, it's just that I know that John, and everybody else, thought a lot of Carl, and anybody who knew him, would remember him, and always remember what a great guy he was.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Carl Chavis, a year ahead of John Coltrane in school, played on the William Penn football and basketball teams for four years, and captained both teams during his junior and senior years. Summers, he worked as lifeguard at the Colored Municipal Park. "Chavis Has Most Envious Sports Record," *Students' Pen*, May 22, 1942. In addition, Chavis was elected Senior Class President, 1941-42. His classmates also voted him handsomest boy, with the best physique. "Superlatives of the Senior Class," *Students' Pen*, May 22, 1942. Carl Chavis was a member of High Point's Negro Amateur Boxing Team, and retained the title of Carolinas Golden Glove heavyweight champion for three years. October 21, 1941, Chavis knocked out Frank Manning of Tampa, Florida in the third round of a bout at the East Washington Street Community Center. "High Point Negro Boxing Team Wins From Shelby Club," *HPE*, October 22, 1941. Chavis enrolled at Morgan State College, September 1942. News of Colored People: *HPE*, September 11, 1942.

<sup>61</sup> It may be that Carl Chavis served indirectly as a role model for Coltrane and others who sought a way out of the segregated South, other than through an academic education. Following Chavis's example, Coltrane may have thought to pursue musical mastery, rather than scholastic excellence.



**Simpkins:** Was he [Coltrane] involved in Student Council and things like that?

**Brower:** No.

**Simpkins:** What was it like, personally, in high school, then?

**Brower:** Well, in high school, it was still very congenial. Didn't have no enemies. I can't think of any instance—I'm trying to think if Coltrane ever got involved in a fight with anybody; and I can't think of one.

**Simpkins:** Why was that? Did he ever get into any arguments?

**Brower:** No. He wasn't even the kinda guy that really got into big debates about anything. In other words, if you're sittin' around, you're talking, I wouldn't say that he didn't try to make a point. But I'm tryin' to say that Coltrane and I were generally, for ourselves, we generally saw so much eye to eye, that he and I never even had any real difference of opinion. We used to, we used to kid each other about what's a better car, which car looks better and all that type of stuff. But to say, discussin' some philosophical, little aspect of life, or what was worthwhile, seemed like we never had any discussions of that type, at all. And I'm tryin' to think of all the other guys that we knew, that passed through our lives in high school, and that knew John, like I know him, but I can't recall anybody that he ever had any difficulty [with].

**Simpkins:** What other close friends did he have, besides James Kinzer?<sup>62</sup>

**Brower:** Well, let's see, now, I would say, there was this guy Martin that he seemed to have got pretty close to. We called him "Red Martin." I can't think of Martin's first name. He was some relationship to Mr. Henley, who had the hotel there, and he came, like, late, when we was juniors or sophomores in school. Might even have come when we was a freshman, but he was the kind, like I said, that John picked up during the late years.<sup>63</sup>

**Simpkins:** When his mother left, who was he staying with?

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<sup>62</sup> James Kinzer was selected sports editor of the *Students' Pen*, 1940-41, and business manager, 1941-42 and 1942-43. In 1942, his classmates voted James most active boy. "Brower To Edit the Pen Next Year," and "Junior Class Superlatives," *Students' Pen*, May 22, 1942. Kinzer played the position of center on the 1942 William Penn High School football team, and was awarded a letter in the Spring 1943. "Seven Athletes Get Letter," *Students' Pen*, May 21, 1943.

<sup>63</sup> The Henley Hotel, located just a few doors up from the Coltrane/Blair residence, housed both the Drake Confectionery, owned by Charles Drake, and a grocery store, run by the hotel's owner, J.C. Henley. The hotel, sited on the corner of Underhill and Washington faced both streets, and so had two addresses, 108 Underhill, and 1103½ Washington. *High Point City Directory, 1942-43*. On July 8, 1941, the Henley Hotel was temporarily closed under a restraining order issued by High Point Municipal Court Judge D.C. MacRae, following the arrest of "more than two dozen persons in an early Friday morning raid on morals charges," (that is, on Friday, July 4). Prosecuting attorney Harriss H. Jarrell alleged that the Henley Hotel "has been operated and is being operated by the defendant (John C. Henley) in such a way as to constitute a public nuisance and an affront to public morals and decency; that upon said premises are several rooms which are flagrantly used by persons for the purposes of adultery, assignation, prostitution, lewdness and immorality." "Henley Hotel Is Padlocked Under Temporary Order Here." *HPE*, July 8, 1941. On September 10, 1941 the *High Point Enterprise* reported that 13 couples had been charged in July with "occupying rooms for immoral purposes," and that "J.C. Henley, hotel operator, [had been charged] with operating a bawdy house." "Henley Hotel Will Remain Closed For Four More Months," *HPE*, September 10, 1941. In November, the hotel was allowed to reopen under strict police supervision. "Henley Hotel Allowed To Resume Operations; Restrictions Imposed," *HPE*, November 5, 1941. The *High Point City Directory, 1942-43* lists both J.C. Henley and William Martin as residents of the Henley Hotel.

**Brower:** Well, that left Mrs. Lyerly, there—that’s his aunt, Mary Lyerly’s mother. And Mrs. Lyerly wasn’t too strict, in a way. I mean, she—now, Mary’s career had been somethin’ like John’s—she was like a sister to John—and she had been a good student at one time,<sup>64</sup> but then in high school, she sorta went back in the pack. But like I said, basically, after John’s mother left, he began to sorta want to let out, and have a little more fun, there wasn’t anything to kinda hold him back. I’m not sayin’ he got wild, it’s just probably typical of the kids. Somehow or another, I didn’t go along with it. That’s why I probably speak in somewhat negative terms about little things he did. But he was just a normal guy, in a way. The only thing I will say that I do know, that they started drinkin’, which I didn’t like. And I remember one time, this Doreatha and I, we came friends—later—and she was in Philadelphia there, for a while, and I was workin’ for the *Afro-American*, as a reporter, and she came down, she got a job there, as a secretary. So one time I was at her house, and we was talkin’, and so I mentioned somethin’ about the fact that John and I began to drift apart because he became a thrill-seeker. So, I never will forget, she repeated the word “thrill-seeker” so *contemptuously*.

**Simpkins:** What do you mean, in response to you, or agreeing with what you said?

**Brower:** Well, she was repeating the word, but she was saying it as though I had uttered something that was absolutely silly, the way I said it, maybe I shouldn’t [have said] thrill-seeker, just because he was beginnin’ to go out with girls and stuff like that. But like I said, in a way, he was just bein’ normal. The only thing, I do recall that they were always talkin’ about this, gettin’, not drunk, [but] drinkin’ whiskey. And so I say, well, what these guys gon’ be doin’, all that drinkin’ whiskey and have these girls with ’em, and so I figure they were up to some real shenanigans, but just what happened, I never even found out, because I never pressed nobody. I do know they had these parties, and they’d be talkin’ about how much they drank, and that type of thing. He and I begin to kinda get sarcastic with each other, I begin to make snide remarks about what was goin’ on. I never tried to tell him he wasn’t doin’ right, or anything like that, it’s just like, well, “Whatever you’re doin’, Chief, I don’t go for it, I ain’t worried about it, I don’t want no parts of it,”<sup>65</sup> nor do I look down on him in any way. I was kinda jealous, because I guess

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<sup>64</sup> Mary Lyerly graduated valedictorian of her class at Leonard Street School, May 1940. *News Of Interest To Colored People: HPE*, June 6, 1940. As they progressed through their high school years, it may have become increasingly apparent to John Coltrane and Mary Lyerly that strong academic performance would not improve their prospects for employment after graduation. This stark fact was certainly evident to their history teacher, Clarence E. Yokely, who in 1939 published the results of a survey of High Point businesses he had conducted, showing that a William Penn High School graduate could at best expect to find work as a maid, cook, yardman, general house cleaner, or child nurse. As a consequence, Yokely proposed instituting a hybrid curriculum, combining academic courses with practical training in building trade skills, such as carpentry, painting, paper-hanging, glazing, cement, brick-laying and plastering. Clarence E. Yokely, “Occupational Opportunities For High School Graduates,” *HPE*, October 29, 1939; and “William Penn Will Present Improved Vocational Courses,” September 1, 1940.

<sup>65</sup> Brower had reason to be wary of such behavior. In 1943, 2,999 men were convicted of drunkenness in North Carolina and sentenced to at least 30 days on a chain gang. This number constituted 3/8 of all male (and 1/5 of African American male) criminal sentences to “the road” that year. Overall, in 1943, five “colored” men were sentenced for every four “white,” although whites outnumbered African Americans in North Carolina 2.5:1. <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/33973538v2p5ch4.pdf>; and

the guys were havin' fun, and I just didn't go along.<sup>66</sup> Now, I do remember there was a case, there, where [an] insurance agent's wife became kinda liberal with her body, and, guys would start talkin' 'bout this woman, and there was a, a particular, it was, this guy that supposed to have been, you know, makin', doin so much with her, havin', havin' relations with her and everything, was a guy that you wouldn't expect, you know? And then the word was getting' around that other guys could, could make it [too]. So, I, I think Coltrane, you know, was involved in that bunch, and it might have been his first introduction to sex. I'm not too well up on that, but I do know that this woman, he was talkin' like he had done somethin'--she was known to really be givin' it up to all these young school kids. She wasn't that much older than they, but she was definitely, like, in her twenties, and these boys were all sixteen and seventeen.

**Simpkins:** Did he have a job in High Point?

**Brower:** Well, yeah, the only job he ever had in High Point was, like, workin' in the drug store.

**Simpkins:** When did he...

**Brower:** He worked there, like, it's maybe last two years in school, in high school. I don't know, see, he didn't have to work too much, like in the early years. In other words, he never did any—oh, I carried papers, myself, like, say, all my high school years. He never—sorta, paper jobs. He never went up town to get any kind a job in the stores, like stock boy or anything like that. In other words, he just didn't seem to have to worry about workin', and then, finally, he got this job working' in the drug store, which, I guess came in pretty good, 'cause by that time his mother musta been [gone], you know. First of all, he, like every other boy in town, was clothes-conscious. There's another thing--we were *very clothes-conscious*. In other words, we wanted—first store you have to get all our clothes from was a place called Jacobs. So you know, [unintelligible] we used to buy our pants from there. Drapes.

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State Highway and Public Works, Prison Department, *Biennial Report for the two years ended June 30, 1944*, Raleigh, North Carolina. For a discussion of living conditions on a North Carolina chain gang, see Bayard Rustin, *Down the Line* (Chicago, Quadrangle Books, 1971), 26-45.

<sup>66</sup> In the wake of Negro disfranchisement throughout the South (achieved during the decade 1890-1900), many members of the African American aspiring class sought to persuade whites to reinstate their right to vote by living respectably, pursuing education, and dedicating themselves to the uplift of the Negro race. They attempted thereby to demonstrate their trustworthiness as citizens in hopes of taking their place in American society. In High Point, a number of Underhill residents subscribed to these notions, and undertook to instill such values in their children through the churches and schools. These families regularly advertised their students' achievements in the Colored News column of the Segregationist newspaper, the *High Point Enterprise*. Thus, the students of Leonard Street School, Fairview Elementary School, and William Penn High School grew up under glass, as it were, acutely aware that their actions reflected upon the entire African American community. Yet, William Penn students represented only a fraction of this community: less than half of High Point's African American children attended school past seventh grade; and fewer than a quarter graduated from high school. The *High Point Enterprise* routinely highlighted this disparity by trumpeting news about the crimes of anonymous "Negroes," while burying the Colored News column in its back pages. We may surmise that John Coltrane early recognized the futility of adhering to the prescribed path, and deliberately departed from it. Franklin Brower, on the other hand, never wavered in his commitment to respectability and racial uplift. Brower's insistence, thirty years later, that Coltrane, as a 15-16 year-old boy, had betrayed his group's code, speaks to the hold such ideas had both on himself and the community in which he and Coltrane grew up.

**Simpkins:** That's what you called 'em.

**Brower:** Yeah. They had these--had a open seam, like...um hmm, well, that was the big thing.

**Simpkins:** What was it like, then, in high school?

**Brower:** What were the clothes like?

**Simpkins:** What were they like? Describe 'em.

**Brower:** Well, we had, like I say, we had the drape pants.

**Simpkins:** Big—long? Have a break in 'em?

**Brower:** No, they would have a big, big at the knee, and tight at the—bottom. In other words, you could have, say, like a 25, 26 knee, and a 14 cuff, you know? That was it—it was like, something' like the zoot suit. It was like the zoot suit, but it was, well, we called 'em drapes, and for the most part, that--what we wore was mostly pants, and I guess we had jackets, too, but, you know, when you went to school, you didn't wear no jacket, you know? You just wore pants, and maybe some other little type of jacket, durin' the winter months, but in the winter months, it didn't get terribly cold, you know, not down there.

**Simpkins:** What was the slang like? What slang words did you have, back then?

**Brower:** Well, I'm tryin' to think, if there was anything significant.

**Simpkins:** Well, like drapes or whatever, you know.

**Brower:** Well, we had drapes, and then, I remember Coltrane, after he got this job at the drug store, he began to have his clothes tailor made, what you call a Shacklefort's (spells name out). You could get yourself a tailor-made suit for 25-30 dollars, at that time, and one thing about these drugstore jobs—I knew a couple guys who had it before, a guy named Joe Scott, another guy name Lee Mayly—they were also sharp dressers, you know, money in their pockets, so it was pretty well known that you could, you know, kinda slice off a little money on the side there. In other words, seemed like, you know, you could, uh, make yourself a few extra bucks just by puttin' the money in your pocket. I mean, actually, it's called stealin', but I mean that's what it was.

**Simpkins:** Wait, now, I'm sorry, I missed—

**Brower:** Well, I mean, if you worked at the drugstore, like you were the soda fountain man, you know? And I was sayin' that, uh, you know, you got paid for the job, but then one of the extra things about it was...

**Simpkins:** You could take a little.

**Brower:** Yeah, you could try to take a little on the side, and Doc Lemon and Doc Greenwood, who ran the place, they didn't get too excited about the thing, as far as I know, I mean, maybe they didn't, maybe they didn't even know, I mean, I guess it would be, it would be foolish just to say, well, they condoned it, you know, but, uh, they were happy with the guys they got, you know? Like I said, they and Lee Mayly and Joe Scott, and then Coltrane came along. He got the job, and there was no indication of any dissatisfaction with him, you know? Like I said, John was--that was a good job for John. It enabled him to really, you know, dress up nice, and, uh--'cause we always, both he and I, we always had very good interest in, in clothes--anything that was stylish, you know?

**Simpkins:** You were gonna say about the slang. I interrupted you.

**Brower:** Well, no, well, like I say, outside of the drape clothes, the term drapes for drapes, uh, let's see, shoes, I can't think of any special term we had for shoes.

**Simpkins:** No term for girls?

**Brower:** No, no.

**Simpkins:** Chicks, like that?

**Brower:** No. Might've called 'em chicks, but I don't, I don't think—slang wasn't too much a part of the language.

**Simpkins:** When did John become interested in music?

**Brower:** So, basically, I would say that he started gettin' interested in music--first interest I knew, he started buyin' *Downbeat* magazine, around his Junior year, and I didn't have any interest in *Downbeat*, and I used to, sorta, act like he was buyin' a Mickey Mouse book or somethin', like, "What you buyin' that magazine for?" But he begin to be interested, he begin to study the ads, particularly, I noticed, like he was interested in the ads on certain instruments, and things like that. Now, I don't know, did, when you were in High Point, did you hear about a guy named Haygood or Haywood?

**Simpkins:** Mm hm, but I never did get to see him, though.

**Brower:** Is he still livin' or did they, did they say he's livin'?

**Simpkins:** Somebody gave me a long list of people that I should see, and I think the name was written down on that. That's right, he had a band! And they said that he was gone, I think that's what happened. But they didn't say anything about him bein' dead.

**Brower:** Well, he was in his forties, then, so that would easily make him pretty old, now, see. But he had a restaurant, and...

**Simpkins:** Where?

**Brower:** Up on Washington Street, there, and it was a big clean place, but he did the cookin', and he had a saxophone, and he used to, when things weren't busy, he'd be sittin' back in the kitchen, or sometimes be out, in among the tables with his saxophone. So, he was one of the people that I knew John was seein', in reference to his interest in music, but they didn't have a school band, at that time.<sup>67</sup> The only musical activity that they engaged in was with an *a capella* group that Professor Burford organized.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> In 1939 and 1940, Charles Haygood was employed as a tailor and washer at New Service Laundry, 627½ E. Washington. In 1941, he apparently became the manager of Williams Dining Room, at 504 E. Washington, where his wife Geneva was also employed as a cook. *High Point City Directory, 1941*. By the following year, Haygood had taken over the restaurant, renaming it Haygood Dining Room. *High Point City Directory, 1942-43*. Lawrence Graves recalls that John Coltrane regularly rehearsed with Charlie Haygood most afternoons, and performed with Haygood and a rhythm section weekend evenings. Graves remembers that Haygood would close the restaurant for the rehearsals, and that school children, on their way home, would peer into the window to watch and listen. Graves says that the weekend performances were well-attended. Lawrence Graves interviewed by David Tegnell, October 2008.

<sup>68</sup> At least during his senior year, John Coltrane participated as a member of the William Penn High School Boys' Chorus, founded and directed in 1940 by Principal S. E. Burford. This group likely exposed Coltrane to music of a higher quality and greater technical challenge than anything he may have performed as a member of the comparatively rudimentary high school band. During the 1942-43 school year, the Boys' Chorus performed often, "before gatherings at colleges, high schools, churches, both colored and white, community singings and club meetings." At a school ceremony held in the Spring of 1943, Coltrane was one of 23 members to be awarded a "lyre" for his participation in this choral group. He did not receive a

**Simpkins:** Was there a community band?

**Brower:** Well, there might have been some sort of a band. There was a man named Steele.<sup>69</sup> Did you ever...

**Simpkins:** Yeah, I heard about him.

**Brower:** Yeah, well, he had some sort of band that was different from jazz music, I think. He wasn't so interested in that type of music, and I think John got in contact with him. See, these were things where he became involved with people, he was sorta doin' it, and I wasn't, I wasn't aware. We [would] still get together, we'd be talkin', you know? We could stand out on the corner there, Drake, at the Henley Hotel, at the corner there—they might have torn it down, I think they tore it down. It was at the head of Underhill, right where Underhill ran into Washington Street.

**Simpkins:** I know where that is.

**Brower:** Uh huh. Actually, it was a lady by the name of Drake that had a confectionery,<sup>70</sup> and we would stand there and talk and talk and talk, until almost twelve o'clock, which was very late, then. Like I said, I can't tell ya, you can't recall the conversations. And we used to go in the pool halls. And that was one of the few recreations available to us, after we got into high school. We used to like to shoot pool, but he never gambled; he never got any vices from pool. And, I'm tryin' to think, let's see, outside of that, just outside of singin', I don't know of any other interests. One thing that Kinzer might have, in case you, when you talk to him, he might have come old copies of the *Student Pen*, which is the paper put out by the students. That's a sign that Coltrane and I were no longer of that type—in our last two years, was the fact that I was editor of the paper those two years and he wasn't in my, you know, paper-producin' group. I had about 4-5 guys that helped me put out the paper. And, uh, John didn't have a hand in it, you know? But there might be some references to John in there for some reason. I do know I made a mention of the fact that, like, we had the—what was the name we called that thing? Anyway, a special feature we had was, like some snooper that used initials, you know, to tell...

**Simpkins:** Tell on people.

**Brower:** Yeah. I remember I put somethin' in about Coltrane, one time (laughs). I told him about it, you know. I mean, not that he wasn't gonna see it, but [I] remember tellin' him about it in front, you know, but what it was, I can't remember--it's been so long. But we used to come out with the paper—in our senior year, we did pretty good—we supposed to come out once a month, but even before I became

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"lyre" for his band participation, seemingly because he did not play in the school band during his senior year. Indeed, by this time, Coltrane may have progressed so far beyond his classmates that he lost interest in the band. In January 1943, *The Students' Pen* published the following comment on the relative merits of the two musical organizations: "With due apologies to the band...we nominated the WPHS Boys' Chorus as the outstanding music organization of the school year thus far." "Boys' Chorus Adds To School's Music Prestige," *Students' Pen*, May 21, 1943.

<sup>69</sup> The 1940 *High Point City Directory* lists Warren Steele as the director of the Southside Community Center, located at 317 Loflin, in the South Side (or Fairview) African American neighborhood. Steele and his wife, Lula, resided at 1302 Furlough. Warren Steele was also a member of St. Stephen A.M.E. Zion Church, and as early as 1929, served as its superintendent of Sunday school. "At The Churches Today," *HPE*, December 8, 1929. Thus, Steele was deeply involved in the informal education of the youth of both of High Point's African American communities.

<sup>70</sup> Located at 1101 Washington Street, in the Henley Hotel, *High Point City Directory*, 1942-43.

editor, it used to do good to come out three times a year, with this paper. And then after I got editor, I know my first year, we did pretty good, musta came out about 5-6 times; in my senior year, we really went to town, so over those two years you probably will find a few references to Coltrane, but I lost all my copies—but Poche used to, you know...

**Simpkins:** Keep 'em.

**Brower:** Yeah, he used to keep 'em.

**Simpkins:** You got yearbooks or anything?

**Brower:** No, we didn't have any yearbooks in school, at all. Only thing you might find--uh, I don't know who would have any pictures. I know when we were first goin' to school, like, say, the first five or six years of our schoolin', we used to have a class pictures. But, I know Poche used to have a pretty good run of his picture, but he was always in the B class, so he wouldn't have anything of Coltrane of that line. Now, the A students, I don't know who would really have it, unless somebody like Charles Whitted might have it, if you ever run into him.

**Simpkins:** The principal? You mean, his son?

**Brower:** His son, yeah, uh huh. Mm hmm. Well, Charles wasn't that close to John.

**Simpkins:** But he might have a picture.

**Brower:** Yeah. Uh huh. But he knew John. I mean, he was—all of us was a bunch, you know? But Whitted—Charles—he was nice fella, considering his father was the principal. And we used to—we ribbin' his father, you know, not, not in person, you know, and the--not only that, he [Charles] was a very poor athlete. There was one other thing I was thinkin' about. And that was the fact that in later years, when John began to play with the professional bands, I think that I was the first person to make note of him in public print. It happened that I was workin' for the *Afro-American* in Philadelphia at the time, and John came out of the service, and had been playin' around Philadelphia, but I hadn't been followin' him [closely]. You could hear about him, and when I talked to Kinzer, he'd be tellin' me John is doin' this and John is doin' that, and then sometime I stopped over the house—this is when he was stayin' up on North Twelfth Street—and this guy...

**Simpkins:** This is when he was living with his mother and his aunt Bettie...

**Brower:** Yeah, well, his mother seemed to have been still livin' someplace else, most of the time. But Mrs. Lyerly was at this place, this apartment, and then Mary was there. Then, Mrs. Lyerly died sometime during that period--I just can't remember when she died.<sup>71</sup> One thing I [had] intended to do was write Mary a letter and just tell her that all the time I knew Mrs. Lyerly, I'd found her to be a very nice woman. And I was sorta indicatin' [earlier in the conversation] that after John's mother left High Point that Mrs. Lyerly didn't make a point of bein' tight on him—strict—which was just as well.<sup>72</sup> I'm not sayin' that she had that responsibility, but I'm sayin' that these little things that John did, just beginnin' to

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<sup>71</sup> Bettie Lyerly died Monday, June 2, 1952 in Philadelphia. News Items of Interest To Colored People, *HPE*, June 5, 1952

<sup>72</sup> Porter writes that Bettie and Mary Lyerly moved to Newark in February 1943. Both the 1941-42 and 1942-43 editions of the *High Point City Directory* list Bettie Lyerly (but not Alice Coltrane) in residence at 118 Underhill. The 1943 edition lists only Thomas Fair at this address; the Fair family likely moved into 118 from 124 Underhill, where they had lived prior to Bettie's departure. Porter, *Coltrane*, 20.

drink and so forth was done while he was supposedly under the care of Mrs. Lyerly, I would say. But I'm pretty sure that when his mother left, Mrs. Lyerly must have had the understandin' that John...

**Simpkins:** How could I get that notice that you put in the *Amsterdam News*?

**Brower:** Well, it wasn't the *Amsterdam News*, it was the *Afro American*, right? And I don't recall the year, but it would be sometime around forty-nine, I'd imagine. See, I left the *Afro* in late fifty. But what happened was, I knew that he was with Gillespie, or—most likely it was Gillespie...

**Simpkins:** Right. Forty-nine.

**Brower:** Uh huh, but they were supposed to appear at the—no, they were making an appearance at the Earle Theater, in Philly, you know with the big band—stage show place, left of Market, and...

**Simpkins:** That's near his house.

**Brower:** And I knew that he was gon' be there, so I wanted to write a little story about this kid, came up from North Carolina, bought himself a sax, went into the Navy, came out, and now he was beginnin' to play with name bands. But, I didn't have the details I wanted, about who [he'd] been giggin' around with in Philadelphia. I was a pretty conscientious person, as a reporter, and I did want to have a little more details to make it a complete little story. But seemed like I was very busy, and I never did get up to John's house—and even if I'd got there, might not have caught him. So I ended up havin' to make it like I did, but just in outline, I omitted the fact that he came outta North Carolina.<sup>73</sup>

## Philadelphia

**Simpkins:** Why did you come to Philadelphia? Why did John come to Philadelphia?

**Brower:** Well, I guess because of me and Poche. And Poche probably came because I was comin', but seems like I was the only one that had any connections in Philadelphia. See, I had two brothers there, already, and this was durin' the war, and it was a question of where you were goin' to try to make some of that war money. Like I said, I was intendin' to go to college, and I think I was plannin' to go to Wilberforce—I had a brother who went there. Poche, he was wantin' to go to Virginia State. So I said I was goin' to Philly to spend the summer, workin', and Poche decided to come along, because, I guess, to have somebody that he knew. Then I guess knowin' that Poche and I were goin' to Philly, John decided to come along with us--but under any circumstance, he probably would have left High Point, too, but uh...

**Simpkins:** He went just because Poche and...

**Brower:** And myself. In other words, I guess he say, well, we're all good type of friends, you know, so we can go together. He didn't have nobody he could go and say—

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<sup>73</sup> "Dizzy's Saxist Realizes Dream: Coltrane Finally Ends Up at Earle," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, November 5, 1949, p. 8, reproduced in Porter, *Coltrane*, 77. In the article, Brower does in fact mention that Coltrane was from North Carolina.



he couldn't go and live with his mother, like if she was set up, say, in New York, or even in Newark.

**Simpkins:** 'Cause she was livin' at the--at white folks'.

**Brower:** Yeah, right, uh huh, and so for him to go and say, well, my mother's got a place for me, you know, I, I'll see you fellas, I'm goin' to New York, I'm goin' to Newark, I mean, he woulda easily have gone. But he had no particular interest in Philadelphia, other than the fact that Poche and myself were goin' there. I remember it was on June the eleventh, we took about a 10:30 [PM] train out, and that was my first real train ride, you know? I remember the trip was somewhat uneventful. I mean, it was durin' the wartime, the travelin' on trains was a lot different from what it is now. It seemed like all the trains were usually crowded, I guess because of soldiers, people movin'...

**Simpkins:** Were there a lotta soldiers there?

**Brower:** Well, I don't remember an awful lotta soldiers on this particular trip, but I think it—most thing is, like people comin' up North like we were, just to get jobs, and a lot of 'em goin' back for short visits, and then returnin', so it was very crowded train, and then we got into Washington about 6:30 in the mornin', then we had to change for the train to Philadelphia. So, where we got on the train for Philadelphia, all of a sudden we, we was mixed. See, in those day, you know, down South—comin' up, on the Southern [Railroad], you were always in a segregated car, and then, uh, I remember, I ended up sittin' next to a white woman, and, uh, somethin' happened between John and I, but I just can't remember it. [unintelligible] he took my seat from me, and I ended--I figured, well, let me have my ticket, or somethin' like that—I had a ticket stickin' in the seat. So, uh, we got into Philadelphia, North—we got off at North Philadelphia Station, and that musta been about, well, couple hours later.

**Simpkins:** You think he took your seat. Why did he take your seat?

**Brower:** I, I don't know. Maybe he didn't have a seat. Coulda been, you know? But I remember there was a little somethin' that had happened, you know, in reference to that seat. And I remember, an hour later, we—no, half hour later—we were in Baltimore, and then we hit Wilmington.

**Simpkins:** Wasn't anything—was it animosity?

**Brower:** No, no, like I said, somethin' happened and I didn't, uh, we, we didn't let develop somethin' over it. I don't know whether or not a seat either got available for me, when we left Baltimore, or...

**Simpkins:** Oh, I understand, now, it was just a regular thing.

**Brower:** Yeah, uh huh, but, you know, Coltrane had a sense of humor. I mean, in other words, he would do somethin', and even though you know he was givin' you, you know, a little, a bit of "keek," you know, you laugh about it, you know? And, uh, like I said, my personality is such that, you know, things like that never rubbed me too bad.

**Simpkins:** So you got along, huh?

**Brower:** Yeah, so I remember we got to Philly, and then we took a cab from there to where my brothers were livin'—I had two brothers—1625 N. Park Street, between Broad and 10<sup>th</sup> St. Then we took everything into this house, and then we decided to walk down Broad St. to City Hall to see William Penn's statue standin'

on the top of City Hall. And boy, it seemed like [what would be] a little short walk to us—we walk so far, we said, oh, man, this is a long way.

**Simpkins:** Did you go to see the statue, or did you just...

**Brower:** No, we had to turn back. 'Cause actually, it was like I was walkin' from Columbia Avenue in North Philadelphia all the way down to Market Street, and that's a good five subway stops—Broad Avenue, Fairmont...

**Simpkins:** This was after you got to you brother's house.

**Brower:** Yeah. And we didn't go to sleep or anything, we just decided to walk.

**Simpkins:** Did you walk to see William Penn's thing, or were you just walking?

**Brower:** Well, we saw the statue--we decided to walk down there.

**Simpkins:** I see.

**Brower:** Right—we didn't have nothin' else to do. I don't know what day of the week it was. I knew soon we were gonna have to look for work, but this first day, that wasn't on our minds, and we were just walkin'. Course, we was impressed--I remember we was impressed by the girls we saw, because it was like, you know, comin' from some place where it was no girls, hardly, and every street was full of 'em, you know? And wasn't anything else that particularly impressed us—I mean, it wasn't like we were impressed by buildings, or anything like that. I just know it was crowded streets, and that type of thing. So, uh, durin' that walk, I mean, I can't recall that John himself, you know, expressed any...

**Simpkins:** Wonderment.

**Brower:** Yeah, about what he was seeing, or anything. But in his mind, I guess he was pretty much decided, you know, when he get a job, he was gonna get himself a saxophone, 'cause that's the first thing he bought, you know?

**Simpkins:** Yeah, well, what did you all do after that? What did he do after that?

**Brower:** Well, he got this apartment on, uh... Well, after we got—we got lost comin' back to the house, because, see, those streets in Philadelphia, they, they might have a Park Avenue, say, between two streets, and then it cuts off, and then you be lookin' for Park Avenue, it might not pick up again for another 60 blocks. But it so happened, in this case, it wasn't quite that bad. But somebody said, "Where's Park Street?"—uh, Park Avenue, I think they called it—and anyhow, they would say, "Well, let's see, what number you want?" But we finally made it back, and after that, I tell you, I can't, I can't recall what we did the rest of that first day in Philadelphia, you know? I guess we sit out on the stoop and sorta, sorta wondered about the city, you know? I mean, we sorta talk about, you know, how things looked, the fact that the row houses were there—something we'd never seen before. You know, the whole block of houses, with nothin' separatin' 'em, I guess, that's one of the things that struck our attention--the trolleys, which we'd never seen. Eventually, we got a chance to ride on the subways, but the main thing is, uh, I don't know just how my aunt—my aunt didn't stay too far—like she stayed, say, Thompson Street—well, that was two blocks over, on the fifth floor, and that's where John and them was lucky, gettin' in there.

**Simpkins:** And Poche?

**Brower:** Yeah, uh huh. Then we began to look for work. I ended up workin' for the Signal Corps. I don't know where Poche got his job.

**Simpkins:** What's that—Signal Corps?

**Brower:** Well, that was like, uh, the Army branch that deals with communications. You know, these radios and electronic equipment. That's called the Signal Corps, but this was a civilian job where this equipment was more or less handled in Philadelphia. You know, stored, processed, and shipped out, so, they had a unit up on Lehigh Avenue, right across from [unintelligible] Park. That's where I go my job. Now John—now, how we went about getting' these jobs, I don't know. I guess we went to the regular, you know, employment office—they had a state employment office. And I remember goin' there, 'cause I was quite impressed by a sight that, you know, there was a colored fellow, like he was one of the, uh, you know, big deals, you know—take care of everybody white, runnin' the place, you understand, like he had a white secretary and all that, you know? So, but anyhow, John musta, we musta all went together, but somehow or another, we just ended up getting' different jobs.

**Simpkins:** You went down to the employment agency.

**Brower:** Mm hmm. And this employment agency I know was around Broad and Susquehanna.

**Simpkins:** You're sure you all went together, though.

**Brower:** Yeah, I'm pretty sure we went together, because we still, we all wanted to work, and we all were sorta hangin' out together, so I guess when you come in and they give you a number, and then you end up with a different interviewer...

**Simpkins:** End up in different places.

**Brower:** Yeah. I mean, you just can't tell her what job you want, you know, she'll say, "Well, what can you do?" I say, "I can't do nothin'," you know, so I just wanted some kinda job, you know? So, the job—people in my category, they can have certain jobs they sent 'em out on, and I guess they tried to satisfy everybody. They didn't send everybody to the Signal Corps--I guess, as many as they could send, as long as the Signal Corps was askin' for people, they would send, but then they had other places to send people, too. So if I had some other interviewer, say, well, his [unintelligible] not the Signal Corps, he's takin' care of these sugar factories, or whatever else, so that's where John ended up, workin' on some sugar factory, and after that, we just didn't see each other too often.

**Simpkins:** Workin', huh.

**Brower:** Uh huh. See, in other words--then the next thing I know, he had him his saxophone. Then, he began to—you know, I just don't know too much about his studyin' or stuff. I think he went into the Service, nineteen, uh—he went in to the Service, when?

**Simpkins:** Forty-five.

**Brower:** Forty-five.

**Simpkins:** He was in music school?

**Brower:** Coltrane? Yeah, he goin' to music school. There was a fella there--I don't know this guy's name—that Coltrane became very friendly with. Like, the guy would come up to the apartment, and he and John would talk, you know, but, uh--a fella he met at the school.

**Simpkins:** Jimmy Heath?

**Brower:** Who?

**Simpkins:** Heath?

**Brower:** No.

**Simpkins:** Calvin Massey?

**Brower:** Calvin Massey—is he a bandleader?

**Simpkins:** He was, uh huh.

**Brower:** No, I don't think so. I don't know whether this guy ever did anything out of his training or not. But anyhow, he was like, he'd come up, and John introduced us, but we never got friendly, you know. In other words, if I go there, and the fella is there, I speak to him, and, uh, then he, he'd [unintelligible] you with John, and you know, they'd have a conversation. But, as far as followin' this fella's career, as to whether or not he—but I do know they were goin'—they must have met in school. But John decided—I don't know what decided him to try to get, you know, schoolin' for this. I guess he—he'd gotten interested in it enough to know that that's what he wanted to know how to do, you know, how to play a saxophone.

**Simpkins:** Did you hear him play around this time?

**Brower:** Oh, yeah, he used to be upstairs there playin' and, uh, thing that impressed me about him, he had these long fingers, you know, and he'd be just blowin' his horn, no particular melody, melodic style, he just seemed to be experimentin', you know, with things like that.

**Simpkins:** He did seem to be experimenting... this in the forties—wait, that's in the Navy.

**Brower:** This is before he went into the Navy, so when he went into the Navy, and I heard he was in the band, I wasn't surprised, because I know that he had gotten to the point that he was doin' pretty good with that sax--not that I could tell how good he was, but I knew he was bein' this serious about it. But even in those days, I didn't give much thought to whether or not he'd become anyone significant. All I knew is that he was talkin' in terms of, uh--eventually, he talked in terms of playin' with people. Then, that's when I began to know that he wasn't interested in a job, he just wantin' to catch on, in a career in music.

**Simpkins:** How long did he stay with the mill job?

**Brower:** Well, he stayed there until he went into the Navy. But I would say, forty-three—you know, that must've been about the only job he had, far as I can recall.

**Simpkins:** What about later, when he started to establish his career?

**Brower:** After he got, you know, kinda big in music, well, we didn't have too much conversation. I remember one time—this was when he had left Twelfth Street, and was livin' on, uh, Strawberry Mansion, on North 33<sup>rd</sup>.

**Simpkins:** When did he move there?

**Brower:** He moved there, I would say—now, let's see, I left Philly in fifty, myself, so it musta been sometime after fifty, 'cause I remember just before I left, Poche made a touch with me, and I know at that time he [Poche] was still with Coltrane and them. So, later, I was up to Coltrane and them house on 33<sup>rd</sup> Street a few times, but I wasn't there that much, and I wasn't livin' in Philly--but then I wasn't up there an awful lot. So, in other words, I could been up there, a period of, say, half dozen times, and it would still seem like a few visits to me, you know?

**Simpkins:** Did he seem changed, at all, over the time that, after he came to Philadelphia? Did he change in his personality, his mood?

**Brower:** No, well, I would say, uh--let's see, now, after he came to Philly, and the way he was in High Point-- I was so out of touch that I don't even know about his interest in girls, you know? When he got this job, I don't know who his tailor was, anything like that, or whether or not he could even had a tailor.

**Simpkins:** In forty-three until the time he went into the Navy, he pretty much worked and went to school.

**Brower:** Yeah, as far as I can recall, 'cause like I said, I was so outta touch with him. Well, I know he was workin', and like I was workin', say, 4:00-12:00, and I guess he was workin', maybe the daytime or somethin', you know? And, let's see, now, maybe he was stayin' near me, and I'm tryin' to see what I was doin' that was keepin' me kinda out of a touch with him. What happened, see, was Poche went into the service, so that took him off the scene altogether. Now, see it was a case of where Poche had still been there, you know?

**Simpkins:** Woulda been a link.

**Brower:** Yeah. I would've at least been in contact with Poche, but by him disappearin' and goin' into the Service, I didn't have any—I could've kept in contact with John, but it just wasn't, somehow or another, done, you know? And for that reason, I didn't—it wasn't until Poche came back from the Service, and got involved with Coltrane's family again, that I kinda got back with Coltrane. I mean, I knew that in the meanwhile, he'd gone into the Service, but I think in the meanwhile, Mary and Miss [Bettie] Lyerly had came up from North Carolina and had taken over this apartment.

**Simpkins:** That wasn't before he went to the Navy, though.

**Brower:** No, well, let's see, I think Mary came up first, then Miss Lyerly came up second. In other words, John and Mary were livin' in this apartment, like, together, you now? And then Miss Lyerly came up, later. She—see, the house down in High Point was, like--Miss Lyerly, she was livin' there and she didn't have nothin' to worry about--it's the family home and everything, and then all of a sudden, for some reason she decide to come up to Philly, so her, John and Mary was in this apartment, but that would be, like, let's see, now, that would be, uh, forty-five. I'm tryin' to remember now, whether or not that was before he went into the service or after, that she finally came.

**Simpkins:** Mrs. Lyerly.

**Brower:** Yeah, but it was probably after he came outta the service that she probably showed up.

**Simpkins:** And then they were all in the apartment.

**Brower:** Yeah, the three of 'em. Miss [Alice] Coltrane never did stay there that much. Now, she would come to the apartment, but I very seldom saw Mrs. Coltrane, even though Mrs. Coltrane and I—talkin' 'bout the mother, now—she always had a lotta resp—you know, when I say she had a lotta respect for me, she always treated me almost like I was another son, you know what I mean? In other words, she accepted the fact that John and I were good friends, and there was nothin' that she ever indicated to me that she, she didn't like me for any reason, you know? And like I said, I had the run of their house in High Point—not that I ran over that much. I mean, I remember her father, Mr. Rev. Blair, he had one of the best libraries, there, but I don't think John benefited from the library that much. In

other words the books were there, and I used to be readin' 'em, but John never showed any particular interest in the books, themselves, you know? But, so, like I said, uh, Mrs. Coltrane just accepted the fact that John and I was just this, this, *tight*, you know, so in later years, when I did see her in Philly, I mean, she, she knew that John and I grew up together, and she talked to me just like, you know...

**Simpkins:** A son.

**Brower:** I was, I was just part of the family, in a way, you know? I remember one time speakin' to her about buyin' the library, 'cause after they left High Point, they didn't bring the library with 'em. And so one time I was down there, I went by the house to see if it was still there, and it was, you know, the family was livin' there, they just closed the house, and the library was still there. They were just renting the house, but the books were still there--the books themselves weren't supposed to be discarded by them, or anything like that. So I remember one time speakin' to Mrs. Coltrane about it. I say, "You know, you got some nice books in High Point. I'd like to [unintelligible], you know?" So, one time, I was in the house on 33<sup>rd</sup> Street and I saw some of the books there, so, evidently, they might have sold that house, but anyhow, whatever happened, they went down there, and I guess they just brought the books away from down [there], so the ones that I wanted wasn't the ones that I saw, so what--I don't know what happened to those.

**Simpkins:** Did he say anything about the Navy? Ever talk about that?

**Brower:** No, I never did discuss his Navy experiences with him, at all.

**Simpkins:** Did he talk very much?

**Brower:** Well, John and I talked a lot, even though it may seem like I'm not recallin' an awful lot. I know when he and I get together, we could talk about things, and we could talk about people, we could talk about events, you know? And, uh, have a nice discussion. And I remember, like one time, we was talkin' about somethin', and talkin' about he made the remark about Louis Armstrong, you know? This was, this was in the late fifties--late forties--when he was just, hadn't made it himself. So, I was makin' a remark [unintelligible], I said, "Man, you don't make--you don't say nothin' like that, like that about Louis Armstrong. That's like talkin' about God," you know? And, uh, I remember, you know, he said, "Yes, man, that's right," you know? So, I'm not--to say that he was passin' judgment, but this idea I was tellin' him that, whoever made that remark--I don't know whether it was Kinzer said somethin' or not.

**Simpkins:** Do you know what it was?

**Brower:** I just can't recall. But, whenever we talk--the last time I talked to John was, we was at the Apollo, and I saw him standin' outside A. J. Lesters, lookin' at some shirts or somethin', and I just happened to bump into him. But we had a nice long conversation. We went around behind the Apollo and we was talkin'. And previous to that, I saw him downtown on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, one night, before he moved into an apartment up here on 101<sup>st</sup> Street, was it?

**Simpkins:** 103<sup>rd</sup> Street.

**Brower:** 103<sup>rd</sup>. And, uh, he was there with his wife. Think he was stayin' at the Alvin, at that time--Alvin Hotel? He was tellin' me about getting' this apartment that I was in. I lived on 105<sup>th</sup> and Amsterdam, I told him. 'Cause at that time I was livin' at 161 West 105<sup>th</sup>, and I was thinkin' about givin' up that apartment, and I was

tellin' him about it--but anytime he and I would get together, we used to have some nice conversation, talkin' 'bout old times, but, you know, we'd just be really runnin', you know? 'Cause I'm talkin' in terms of this type of thing--because I'd met him on 33<sup>rd</sup> Street a few times, you know, and it was like gettin' together, and bein' able to talk about guys we used to know, like at home, and, uh, we wonder what happened to this guy, wonder what happened to that guy, and somehow or another it would lead into a, you know, a long, very pleasant conversation. It always was a kick to be, to get back together with him, even though we'd been separated. Two things I did in Philly—one time I went—I took him down to the burlesque house. Uh, I don't think he developed any special interest in it—I know, I told him, like, I said, "I go down to Troc"—place called the Troc down on Arts Street, uh, Trocadero, but they called it the Troc. So, I went there—it didn't cost but thirty-five cents in those days, and they gave you two strip-tease dancers, and some comedians--they had a band, they had a chorus line.

**Simpkins:** Everything.

**Brower:** Yeah! For thirty-five cents. And, uh, you could, uh, go in, and watch, you know, a couple shows, you know? So, I, I remember tellin' him—this was after he'd been the Navy—and I said, "Man, you know that—we oughta go down the burlesque shows." And he got interested enough to say, "OK, let's go," you know? So, I don't know who the star was—but I know the first time I walked in there, they had a girl named [Winnie?] Garrett—very tall, red-headed strip teaser. And so I--like I said, I don't think he ever, you know, got terribly involved with it, because there really wasn't that much to it, as I look back, but to me, it seemed like an awful lot, at that time, these women takin' off their—piece, piece-by-piece—but you never really saw nothin' [unintelligible]. But another [thing] I remember doin', I took him to see Orson Welles in Jane Eyre. I don't know what Coltrane's movie interests ever became, but I remember I went to see Jane Eyre at the [unintelligible] Theatre in Philly, Chestnut Street, and, uh, I'd never seen Orson Welles--in our hometown, they never did show Citizen Kane--they probably never show Citizen Kane in High Point, yet. But, it [Jane Eyre] was playin'—in this picture, it was really, it really hit me, you know? So, I told Coltrane about it. "Man," I said, "you oughta see this picture. This guy Orson Welles is somethin'." I remember we went, and we walked in on the picture while it was playin', and we sit through it and then the picture ended. It started again--you know, you sit to where you started in--but I was still fascinated by it, so I didn't make no move to leave, and John, he didn't show any interest in leavin', either. So, when we did finally go, I said, "Man, what'd you think about it?" And he said, "Yeah, that guy is something, you know?" Let's see, I'm tryin', I'm tryin' to think what else I can recall--I don't know, I didn't follow his career too close, you know, to see his in and outs. Matter of fact, when I first heard he was with Miles Davis--I mean, in the mid-fifties, I wasn't followin' jazz enough to know who Miles Davis was, you know, so, uh, later on, I met John and he mentioned this situation to me. Matter of fact, I think he may--at that time, he had a record on the, uh, recording machine at his house, playin' some music by this Villa, Villa Lobos.

**Simpkins:** Villa Lob—uh huh.

**Brower:** Yeah, from a—a Brazilian, uh, composer, you know?

**Simpkins:** Uh huh, uh huh.

**Brower:** I was a little surprised that he was playin' classical music, but, if I had been interested, say, in jazz, you know, talkin' about things, and tryin' to figure out everything--but, I just wasn't that interested. I mean, I was kinda glad to hear he was doin' pretty good, even though Poche was tellin' me that, uh, you know, he was kinda dissipatin', in a little certain ways, but, uh, I knew that Monk and all those guys, they was involved in certain stuff, you know. But I never was close enough to even know that, you know, he was doin' anything particular--but if Kinzer has good recall, he'll be able to fill you in pretty good on [the] Philadelphia time, you know? Actually, see, I've thought about writin' things a couple times, you know—not seriously. I say, well, like when the news broke in the *Times*, you know, you had this article and they said he was born in Hamlet. Not that it upset me...

**Simpkins:** They didn't say anything about High Point.

**Brower:** No. Not that it really upset me, it's just the idea that I could've cleared up a little biographical information, because I know the reason why they put it that way—they went to the Encyclopedia of Jazz, and that was there, you know? And so I started to write a little letter, just to throw a little light on the fact that, knowin' the *Times* liked to be paper of record, might've printed the letter just for that purpose only. But, when I went to his funeral, I saw only one other of his classmates there. I was there, and then I saw a girl named Willie Campbell. Now, she live, I think she lives in Brooklyn, but I don't know anything further about her. But I guess she saw the story in the paper, found out where the funeral was gon' be, but she made a point of, you know, just goin' there. Not that she and John was anything close in school. But, uh, of other people—well, let's see now, I hate I lost that [address book], 'cause I could've gave you this Doreatha's, you know—but now [whether] she still lives in the Bronx or not, I don't know. But she was goin' to Fordham School of Social Work, one time, and then I bumped into her on Rocky—Rockefeller Center. She told me she was doin' secretarial work, so she might still be in the City. And other, other people, that's away from High Point, let's see—you know, funny thing, I was in Philly...[tape ends]