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(SNP050) Butler-Brayne Franklin interviewed by
Dorothy Noble Smith, transcribed by Victoria M.
Edwards

Butler-Brayne Franklin

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Interview with Butler-Brayne Franklin

Part of the Shenandoah National Park Oral History Collection, SdArch SNP-050

(SC# 4030)

Interview conducted at Fall Hill, Fredericksburg, Virginia

By Dorothy Noble Smith on October 28, 1977

Transcribed by Victoria M. Edwards, November, 2009

Key

[DS:] Interviewer, Dorothy Noble Smith

[BF:] Interviewee, Butler-Brayne Franklin

[Notes regarding transcription technique]

[unintelligible] Unable to understand more than one word

_____ (??) Transcriber's best guess

- Speaker makes abrupt change in sentence

Refer to the Baylor University Style Guide for consistency in transcription

Much of BF's dialogue is very dim and she tends to speak quietly.

Total interview length: 00:31:48 min.

[Begin audio file, 00:00:01 min.]

BF: This is in my terms and all, but really I'm a [unintelligible]. However, we'll see what we can do.

DS: Yeah. You were saying the first Thornton--

BF: Well, I was thinking of the Shenandoah Valley. When Spotswood became aware of the massive, massive territory out west, he formed a commission, he called it the Ohio Commission. Of course, it rolls out of the trench, the trench business, you know, down in the valley. And he appointed thirteen men first. Francis Thornton, and his brother Anthony had settled in Caroline County. They came up--their father, their grandfather had come up from Boston and settled in Staunton, the original settler who arrived from England in 1643 at Glousters. And his son, he went up to Stafford with him as an old man and founded Society Hill on the Potomac. And his son, Francis, more or less stayed right there, then his grandson Francis went over to the Rappahannock and settled at Snow Creek where Caroline County meets Spotsylvania on the Rappahannock. And it's now a conservatory, it's 800 acres, the most beautiful conservatory--the most beautiful spot on the Rappahannock. Well, that's where Francis Thornton II lived and settled, and married his neighbor Mary Taliaferro. And she--and his brother Anthony went further in and formed the first plantation away from the river, called Armsbury, at Guinea Station near Fredericksburg, eighteen miles from Fredericksburg. Armsbury was built in 1717 and those two men, Francis and Anthony caught Spotswood's eye and he appointed them on a commission to press forward towards Pittsburg--what is now Pittsburg, it wasn't then--and form the Ohio Company. And then he formed another company, and Francis' son was on that, so the Thorntons were a very important part of those first two great Ohio Companies, that settled and enabled this kind of thing to take place in the Shenandoah Valley, in my mind, I mean, how I think about it.

Now, when Francis' son, who built our place, Fall Hill, came up further up the Rappahannock and settled at Fredericksburg. When that son died in 1749, he left in his will money to build a house for each of three sons, one at Sperryville, one eight miles away now called Montpelier--the house in Sperryville, of course is Thornton Hill is still there, up by [unintelligible]. The house at Montpelier, which is the most marvelous thing you've ever seen, if you've never seen it you'll want to, and that is also owned by Mr. Fletcher, who owns Thornton Hill, [unintelligible] the houses now. And then--

DS: What was the name of the son that got the one in Sperryville?

BF: The name was Colonel John Thornton.

DS: Colonel John.

BF: He was a colonel of the line of Washington [unintelligible] and he is the one that the daughter of the son of the Cincinnati was so glad to send from, he sent two or three daughters [unintelligible] colonial age. Well Helen, he married George Washington's niece, who was Augustine's daughter, George Washington's step-niece. Who was Augustine's daughter and she settled there with him. And they had many children. [unintelligible].

DS: She settled in Sperryville.

BF: Oh yes. She was a wonderful person, and one of Washington [unintelligible].

DS: Yes, uh-huh.

BF: Old John was sometimes [unintelligible] but. (chuckle) Well, let me go on about something more important to you. Now, those three places. Then there was their sister Mary, Francis Thornton's daughter. And she never married, but oh she must have been a charmer, she of course followed or visited her brothers and she married, I told you, Mr. Champe, Colonel Champe, [unintelligible]'s friend. And they built a beautiful house and you told me the name of it, the other day on the phone. And Washington came up to see his cousins there and went over to spend the night with her, with her and his friend, house caught on fire and burned to the ground. And Washington just escaped with his life.

DS: (gasps) Well where was this house located?

BF: It, well, it was Colonel Champe's house. It is Champe, C-H-A-M-P-E, isn't it?

DS: I believe so, yes.

BF: Now, Mary loved nature and she was out walking and she found a baby bear cub. And it was deserted, so picked it up, set for home, she looked around, there was the mother, so she dropped it, threw it away, and ran because the mother had chased her. And she just got in the house in time. (laugh) You can realize how [unintelligible]. (laugh)

DS: Yes. How did-is she the one for which Mary's Rock is named?

BF: Yes.

DS: Now, why was that named Mary's Rock?

BF: She was always--she was nearby, I always understood she was always wandering around, you see, the river, the Thornton River had been named for her brother or her father.

DS: Right.

BF: And her grandfather. Both of whom had been on the Ohio Commission, and her uncle.

DS: Yeah, uh-huh.

BF: And by the way, the information that I have on that commission is beautifully detailed, in Campbell's History of Caroline County. He was the clerk of the court of Caroline and wrote one of the finest county histories that's ever been done.

DS: Campbell's History.

BF: Of Caroline County, it's on the, it's for sale now, it's been reprinted, I think they're the same, it was an impossible item to obtain for so long.

DS: You know the story has always been that a young man took a girl by the name of Mary up to the rock and pointed around and said, "See, this is all the land I own."

BF: Oh, that's quite probable, probably was Colonel Champe.

DS: And, "I can—I intend to marry you."

BF: Wonderful.

[00:06:57, tape breaks momentarily]

DS: —"my land."

BF: She did. She left a marvelous will and an enormous fortune.

DS: I know, but, is that true?

BF: It's the only one she--it could have been.

DS: You think that story is true?

BF: Of course, of course. Because he was a brilliant man, Colonel Champe, and Washington was devoted to him.

DS: Mm-hmm. You know, have you ever clamored up that rock?

BF: Oh no, I never did. I missed—

DS: I often wondered how anyone is all those clothes that they used to wear could have climbed up that rock. (chuckle)

BF: I know. Now, there's a little church, F. T. Church, the Francis Thornton Church somewhere down there. Still held services down in there [unintelligible], I'm not sure [unintelligible].

DS: Now, the, the Thornton's actually lived down in Sperryville itself.

BF: On the river. That was one—

DS: On the river.

BF: Yes.

DS: And the gap that runs up from there, was their property?

BF: Well, it's called the F. T. Gap, I don't see how it got that name if it weren't.

DS: Yeah, right. Do you know whether or not they allowed any logging on their property or any farming, when they did any?

BF: I think they were terribly busy all the time, they must have been. I'm sure they did at, I'm sure they did at Montpelier--pronounced various ways, Montpelier, Montpelier.¹ Because Philip Thornton, William Thornton's son, married [unintelligible].

DS: Uh-huh. The Thorntons, how long did they live there?

BF: Well, John Thornton, Colonel John Thornton built it. And it must have--he was a little boy in '49 when his father died and his father left the money for it and he wouldn't have built it for another fifteen years, '49, '59, '69, I guess before the Revolutionary War.

DS: Yes.

BF: Certainly about '70. Now, he had one son, George, who married a Buckner, a lovely girl.

DS: Butler?

BF: Buckner, B-U-C-K-N-E-R.

DS: All right.

BF: Eric Buckner's daughter. Also was a charming person, Buckner. And at the wedding, after the--before the wedding, he was coming with his bride--going to get his bride and he crossed a stream and fell in and got thoroughly wet and didn't wait to change, he rushed to the ceremony and got married. Got pneumonia afterwards and after a lingering illness died. But meantime, his little wife had become pregnant, and she bore a daughter named Jane. Now, that little Jane--well, now let's say, she bore a little daughter named Jane. Now, let me tell you this. That Francis Thornton's grandson, the Reverend Francis Thornton, became a Presbyterian minister and went to Kentucky. He married Colonel John Thornton's daughter, also named Jane, from Sperryville, and took her to Kentucky. And this little--his little daughter-in-law's daughter Jane, went to Kentucky to visit that cousin Jane, [unintelligible]. And there married a Scotchman who'd just arrived named Beck. Just Beck. And the family was amazed and rather hurtful (??) but he seemed so dear and just like, closer than sweet (??) to the family. And that man Beck had a son, George Washington Beck. And he went out and founded Cody, Wyoming, and he has--his son now and has just given it to the [unintelligible], Cincinnati, has the watch fob that George Washington gave his step-niece, Jane Augustine Washington, [unintelligible] and Colonel John Thornton when they were married. And that is now in the Order of the Cincinnati headquarters on Connecticut Avenue and the Anderson House, they've just given it to Anderson House, that wonderful fob that Washington's are on in stone and that he gave as a wedding present for this marriage, you see, now how did I get off on this? Well, that descendant, Jane, the daughter of the Beck family from Cody, Wyoming, is my best friend here in Washington. She's Mrs. Nelson [unintelligible], and she eventually, she eventually married our ambassador to China, who is dead now, and Jane has done a book of her father's life and her family and she knows all of this and she keeps me up on it, she keeps phoning me for information that I have to dig up, so I happen to know that side of the Colonel John Washington family in Sperryville pretty well. Now, he had other daughters, Colonel John Thornton did. He had a daughter named Frances, F-R-A-N-C-E-S, who was named for her grandmother, Frances Gregory, who was George Washington's first cousin.

[00:12:33, tape breaks]

BF: --in Fredericksburg, and had three daughters, and those three daughters married three Thornton brothers, who all followed him, married Frances Reuben. And those three girls were Frances, F-R-A-N-C-E-S, Elizabeth and Mildred. And their progeny, of course, was numerous and--well, let's see now--the one that married, well, the one that, her name was Sandy Frances, she's my and Olivia's ancestor, because her husband, you see, [unintelligible]. Now--and she might have lived this--well, anyhow, their little granddaughter over in the mountains in Sperryville was named for their Frances, F-R-A-N-C-E-S, and that Frances married her first cousin, William Thornton's son, and [unintelligible]. And those two, had a [unintelligible] and they, finally one branch of them, a couple of their children settled in Fredericksburg, and thereby the--sometimes the information--I have charge of our family cemetery there, where Francis Thornton, who left, left money to build the mountain home, is buried and his tomb is in very fine condition, I've just had it repaired, and the city has just taken it over as a national shrine. Not exactly a national shrine, they wouldn't dub it that, but they, the city has, they only have one other responsibility like that and that's Mary Washington's tomb, the mother of Washington, which they keep up beautifully. So we asked them, we formed this association, my brother and I about twenty five years ago to keep that cemetery, because it has twenty one graves in it, all kin to George Washington, and no one else, everybody in there is related to George. So we asked the city to take it over and they

did, so they're keeping it up. And there we trace all our, from those tombs you can trace almost any matter of the Thornton family, the Virginia Thorntons-

DS: Yes.

BF: -this Virginia Thorntons, that married into Washington, that's why these are interesting, because they have Washington blood-

DS: Right, yes.

BF: -definitely has, always Thorntons, that one. And that makes a difference to modern history. It is-

DS: Have you any idea how the land was purchased in Sperryville, that seems sort of far away from Fredericksburg, for those days.

BF: Oh, but remember, their fathers were on the Commission, their minds were over there. Francis Thornton carved--the old father, who settled at Snow Creek--carved a marvelous thing, it's a piece of granite, well, it's as long as that sofa, and in the middle, is a beautiful round bowl, [unintelligible] deep. Now those bowls were formed on the Rappahannock, which is a restless river. By stones, lying on top of boulders, and with the motion of the river for a thousand years, those stones dug a round hole. I know of eight of them. Not all of them perfectly round [unintelligible], but this one was perfect. Francis was so intrigued, he built his mill there, it was the perfect place for a mill, the first grist mill in the area. And after building it--this is three-quarters of a mile over there on the river--after building the mill, he carved, took the trouble, to carve a huge, this high in 1720 and deep, and that's the date and that's the date of the founding of Spotsylvania County, which extended way beyond the Shenandoah Valley, to the Pacific Ocean.

DS: That's right, yes.

BF: And that's the date he held a fish fry at [unintelligible], where the Indians came and dance. Anyhow, he carved other initials with his friends [unintelligible] and among which was L.W., Washington's grandfather, Mr. Bore, J. Bore, Mrs. Washington's cousin and that was why Washington settled there--his father, because she had relatives nearby, their property is still there, the old Bore place is one of the most interesting places in Stafford. And about eight or nine other initials. Well, they had drank punch for forty years, and had a fish fry every year and then [unintelligible] at that point, because the land is lovely around it, the river flows and it is very, very nice. Well, in the Stafford court is an entry where Francis Thornton Jr. my father, my grandfather and my [unintelligible], and that's how we know they had a party every year, because that was a family tradition.

DS: (laugh) Wonderful.

BF: And it's there, the city keeps that up too, and it's sheltered, it's a very nice thing, and the Smithsonian center, it made a replica of it. In plastic, and they gave me one and Johnny Mitchell has one, that runs the museum in town, and the Smithsonian has one of course, it's a big thing made of plastic, and I gave mine to the museum in Fredericksburg, and they've had it with a fence around it in their museum and the note, "Francis Thornton's Fish Fry." [unintelligible], and the Chippendale chair, one of a set that we have just that one, because it was distributed, it belonged to them, [unintelligible] in part [unintelligible] museum in Fredericksburg, and I have it on loan and I have to go home and check up to make sure that that's stipulated. (chuckle)

DS: (chuckle) Ah, you do.

BF: Well anyhow, that's old Francis who left that property. Now, you should read his will if you haven't. The will of Francis Thornton, Jr., who died in 1749 and it's probated in Spotsylvania Courthouse, and last week, I had a copy of it here in this house and I sent it back to Smallville, and couldn't show it to you. (chuckle) Well, in that

will he says, "I leave money to my two sons, to build homes." That's how the spread of the wealth had to be. Now-

DS: When you say mountains, Sperryville is down at the bottom of the mountain.

BF: It's not on the Shenandoah side.

DS: No.

BF: It's on the Fredericksburg side. That's right. So it isn't in the Shenandoah Valley, really.

DS: And it's not in the mountains. Was the home in the mountain part, do you know?

BF: It's right where it is now, in the heart of Sperryville. And Montpelier is on the road from there, which is lovely, the mountains are there, they lovely.

DS: Oh yes.

BF: But it just didn't feel right. That's where they chose to build these homes, but Francis Thornton didn't stipulate that, he just [unintelligible]. Now, he made that rock in 1720, because that was also the date he got his grant for eight thousand acres in Spotsylvania County.

DS: I see.

BF: But those eight thousand, that was even enough to extend over that mountains, that mountain property was another deed. Now, he--there were many in his name, so many that it boggles the mind when you look at the Spotsylvania record, so those deeds to the Sperryville property that he left to his sons and all, they're there. But they've never been recorded.

DS: Yeah, right.

BF: Now, they must be, because it was legal, and the children enjoyed it and their children. Now, William, the brother of Colonel John Thornton who built Montpelier, if you notice, has a hundred feet of white [unintelligible] on the porch, overlooking the most beautiful side of the mountain, [unintelligible] Mountain, [unintelligible] Mountain. And that porch was famous for generations for dances and marvelous cotillions and things because the very charming woman his son married brought them [unintelligible], the life of Montpelier for several generations. Now, and oodles have shown up, there have been lots of people. Then, it was at the very end, the caretaker [unintelligible], this must have been about [unintelligible], and then, he was a nice man, [unintelligible] but he was poor, he had a little [unintelligible] son, they lived in a house, this enormous great house, only one room [unintelligible], just [unintelligible] along and this marvelous balcony on one side, the most beautiful--it's frame, so beautifully made, isn't frame, [unintelligible], it's still there, it looks [unintelligible].

DS: They made very good frame houses.

BF: Oh yes. And it's decidedly, it's decidedly the Frenchman [unintelligible].

DS: Do you know anything about when Mary married Colonel Champe, what sort of a house they had?

BF: I wish I knew, but that was the one that burned down, and it's famous in history that that happened, because Washington just escaped with his life, now this story is everywhere.

DS: Yeah.

BF: So it couldn't be hard to find, [unintelligible].

DS: Oh no, no. I was just—have you any recollection or anybody mention how the fire started? What started the fire?

[BF apparently silently indicates a negative answer]

DS: No. Did they rebuild, then, in the same area?

BF: Now, I have a funny movement in the back of my brain that Colonel Champe died and Mary married again, but I'm not too sure of it.

DS: But she still stayed right there in the Sperryville area, is that it?

BF: I think so.

DS: Yeah. I don't blame her, it's a beautiful area.

BF: It is [unintelligible], and our numerous nieces and nephews, when asked if I [unintelligible], now where do I get this, where [unintelligible], the will must have [unintelligible].

DS: Ahh. So, she divided her property up and it was—

BF: And that's why, sure, she would be the hero or heroine of that property in any part of the world.

DS: Yeah, that would have been recorded in, I wonder why—

BF: Culpeper.

DS: Yeah, Culpeper. And she lived around what year?

BF: She would have been born about—well, you see he married in 1736 and he died in 1749 and she came in maybe 17[unintelligible].

DS: So probably she wrote her will about twenty years later, or thirty years later. Yeah. Culpeper. I think I am going to take a trip to Culpeper to look up that will because that would be fascinating to see. I imagine that—

BF: Now let me first get home to my [unintelligible]. Maybe you haven't got it. It's the, all the papers in Spotsylvania County from 1700 and they're in pretty good form, this man Early did a great service, beautifully done, and it seems to me Mary Thornton's will, I've got it in that from Spotsylvania.

DS: Oh.

BF: I never paid any attention to it, it must be Spotsylvania [unintelligible]. So well, don't do anything until I get home and I'll drop you a letter.

DS: Okay. Fine.

BF: In meantime, if you can get hold of a Croziel's American, all the libraries have them, C-R-O-Z-I-E-L. Croziel's, Croziel's court records for Spotsylvania County.

DS: Okay.

BF: From 1700 to 1800. And there you'll find Mary Thornton numerously mentioned, because she had so much property. I can't think if it would be any other Mary.

DS: Yes, that's right.

BF: Now, she was named, of course, for her grandmother Mary Taliaferro.

DS: Mary?

BF: Taliaferro.

DS: Tolliver.

BF: Taliaferro, you know, T-, you know how to spell it.

DS: Yes, mm-hmm.

BF: And they lived on Snow Creek, and here we're going back again, to go to Spotswood first, these Thorntons first brought his [unintelligible]-you see he was planning his nights to go [unintelligible] trip.

DS: Yes.

BF: And I'm convinced-they don't, Fry neglected to mention any Thornton, but I don't think he would have taken that trip without one of them. I think there was one along, but I don't care, I just think it. I can't prove it. (laughter) And he-now what was I going to tell you? About Mary Taliaferro. They lived there at Snow Creek and Mary Taliaferro, they were cultured, distinguished family. And it was either her brother or her cousin Richard Taliaferro who was an architect in Williamsburg and laid out and planned the old first capital that was burned and redone by Spotswood. That was Richard Taliaferro. There was only one Taliaferro family, it must have been either her brother or her cousin. And Francis Thornton married her, married Mary. And this is where Mary got her name, from her grandmother Mary Taliaferro.

DS: Have you any idea what she looked like, I'm trying to picture this girl. If she loved nature so, she probably had a very animated expression and-

BF: She was a wealth-

DS: -probably slender.

BF: And you see, George Washington's blood, and he was tremendous--and the physique of all those Washingtons was just amazing.

DS: Yes, mm-hmm.

BF: Heavens, she was George Washington's, her mother was George Washington's first cousin. So she was George Washington's first cousin, was Mary Taliaferro.

DS: Yes.

BF: Now, Mrs. Betty Lewis, George Washington's sister, was a magnificent, had a magnificent body, but she wasn't too pretty, they said she looked sort of like--but her executive abilities, she was there [unintelligible], you see, so it's important to us how the Thornton's founder, Betty Lewis, we hear so much about her in Fredericksburg, of course Kenmore was for her and it's on main drive and then she had to leave it because [unintelligible] went over into the county to Mill Brook, which she had bought. A beautiful villa. [unintelligible]'s thirteen miles away. Little Ben called it a poor place, but she said the mill isn't [unintelligible]. And she ran that mill, this capable, executive woman. He dead, the Revolution finished, they would choose to honor his debts, he run the Revolution with his guns practically, for so long, and here was she, with all these grandchildren [unintelligible]. Because you see, Washington's brothers--there was Samuel, the youngest, was Samuel, Samuel in the middle. Samuel married Elizabeth Thornton. Charles married Mildred Thornton, Franklin Thornton's--Mary Thornton's sister, married Washington's brother Charles. And moved to Charles Town, West Virginia and he was, she was his only wife 'til his death, now Samuel had five wives, and Elizabeth was the middle one and they had one son, Thornton Washington, who was the pride of the family. Just one child, and that was Mary's nephew, I think she left him money in

the will, I'm not sure, [unintelligible]. Now there's that family and we mustn't underestimate the terrific Washington tradition of that day. How he held up the whole nation, Washington did, with the power of his person.

DS: That's right.

BF: And it lasted for [unintelligible].

DS: It did.

BF: And those people, those Thornton girls who married those Washingtons, there were three of them we mentioned this morning. There's Jane Thornton, Augustine's daughter, Washington's little step-sister, with whom he went to go to school when his father died and he was eleven, his mother sent him to Augustine at Pope's Creek because Augustine had inherited that property and was the only one who had any money and had married a rich girl. [unintelligible]. Anyhow, Mrs. Washington sent George over there to school and he went to school with this little Jane, that's why he gave her his watch fob when she married Colonel John Thornton in Sperryville.

DS: Yes.

BF: Now they--you might, we might wonder, by going back to your persistent question about the property in the valley, that in your mind has to connect up with all this or it really any too much use to you.

DS: Yes it is, yes it is, because there's Thornton Gap, there's Thornton Hollow, there's Thornton River and nobody has really known why. So it must--

BF: [unintelligible]. (laugh)

DS: No, they don't, so what happened, probably, is that when she gave this land to cousins--

BF: Yes, which she had, I'm sure.

DS: Their name was different than Thornton, and they may have settled in there and so we're ending up with different names in the Thornton Gap, which makes you wonder why is there a Thornton Gap? Now we know why. Why is there a Thornton River, now we know why. Why is there a Mary's Rock, and we've got it, you see? I am positive that it's in her will that we will get the names of the people--

BF: Lots of them.

DS: --that eventually settled up in that, in the mountains itself.

BF: Now, I'm wondering if she died Mary Champe. Or had she married again. I don't know.

DS: Yeah, well, her will would say, wouldn't it?

BF: Well, yeah.

DS: Yeah.

BF: [unintelligible].

DS: (laugh) People have no right to remarry. (laugh) Get things all mixed up.

BF: [unintelligible].

DS: Yes.

[End audio file, 00:31:48 min.]

End of Interview

1 Two French pronunciations, leaving or dropping the "r".

Butler-Brayne Franklin, 08/28/1977

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