

Interview with Dr. John Holt, conducted in his office in Asheville, North Carolina, on October 10, 1979. The interviewer is Bruce S. Greenawalt of the University of North Carolina at Asheville.

Bruce S. Greenawalt: Dr. Holt, none of us come on the scene without a family background of some kind, and I thought maybe the best place to start here would be with your own family background: what you may know about your grandparents, both your paternal and maternal grandparents, where they came from and what they did, and who they were.

Dr. John Holt: Let's start with my maternal grandparents, since they were probably more interesting. My grandfather; his name was Plummer Austin Richardson and he came from Halifax County. My grandmother's name was Louise Battle. But the interesting thing was: he had a third grade education, and he walked from Halifax County to Nashville, North Carolina, and became a barber while he was still a teen-ager.

Greenawalt: Halifax County is off in the Eastern North Carolina; that was quite a walk.

Holt: It would be a matter of maybe fifty miles. He became a barber; set up the first barber shop in Nashville, and he educated himself to a very high degree. In the meantime, by 1927, he was the first black millionaire in North Carolina. He made his money in tobacco farms. So he started as a barber, and then he started buying

Holt: (Cont'd.) tobacco farms. After a while he had about thirteen or fifteen tobacco farms, and then he went into real estate; then he went into insurance; then he established a funeral home, and one thing after another.

Greenawalt: What state was all this activity going on?

Holt: All right there in Nashville; in Nash County, Edgecombe County, say, from Halifax County up to wherever Durham is, in this area. During this time he became general treasurer of the National Masons, which at that time was the biggest fraternal order for blacks in the country, and also treasurer for the AME church.

Another interesting thing: when the Depression came, he lost much of his fortune; much of his real estate and all, but he kept his farms, against all of the things. His concept was (and I remember him telling me this) that he started with the farms and the brown earth would always be there.

Then World War II came, and in something like two or three years . . . anyhow, during the war. . . he paid off over a half million dollars in debt and then just started again. When he died rather suddenly. . . I think, in 1948, he again was in that realm. He had nine children. My mother happened to have been the oldest. The things that this man did: he wrote beautifully; he left a library of over five hundred books, including a collector's item of Shakespeare, and also to the extent of books on embalming, and so forth, and he'd read them all.

Greenawalt: Where was his home?

Holt: His home was in Nashville, North Carolina.

Greenawalt: ~~Nashville, North Carolina.~~

Holt: Which is a little town, ten miles from Rocky Mount, and in '48, when they had his funeral, people came from all over the country, and they estimated that five thousand people came to his funeral. The significant part to me, and I've always felt this since I was a little boy, was that this was done out of Nashville, North Carolina; not as big as Hendersonville.

Greenawalt: You must have had quite a few memories, then, of the man, if he lived on until 1948.

Holt: Yes; I did. As a little boy, we used to go down in the summer time and had homes and things there on the farms. I didn't learn a lot about farm life, but it was just a unique experience.

Greenawalt: Did he have tenants, or sharecroppers, working these farms?

Holt: He had tenants. . . and he also, during this time. . . and I only found this out in later years. . . but he gave, about seven or eight farms to people who had been tenants for him over a period of time, and he would just give them the farms. At one time, he reportedly owned around two hundred houses. My uncle still owns the funeral home there in Nashville, and one in Louisburg. At one time, for, I guess, a period of about twenty years, they had the largest black burial association in the state; that was unusual. My grandmother was the daughter of a Blackfoot Indian and a white man in Nashville.

Greenawalt: Are you talking about Mrs. Richardson?

Holt: Mrs. Richardson; and the peculiar thing about it: this was one of those family areas where everybody knew everybody else and where everybody was everybody's first or second or third or fourth cousin, and so forth. On her side of the family, her father gave her and her brother, both, big farms right there in Nashville. So, on my mother's side, they came up under rather affluent circumstances for that time. Well, they really came up under kind of affluent circumstances for any time.

My father was born here in Asheville, and we never have really searched much of his history, but we do know this: that his father was sent to Asheville from Spencer, North Carolina, in charge of the group that laid the track leading to Asheville. A very significant thing: I never knew my paternal grandfather, but he headed this group, and he sent his brother to medical school. He was Dr. John Walker, who was one of the early black physicians here in Asheville.

He sent his sister through college, and she was the first black college graduate here, and was the Lee that Stephens-Lee school was named for. My father went to school here and then left.

Greenawalt: Where did he attend school?

Holt: He went. . . at that time it was called "Catholic School." That was Catholic Hill, the school that finally burned down. Well, it burned down years later. I think it burned down about the twenties. He went to school at Catholic Hill, then he left and went to Morristown, which was a church junior college.

Greenawalt: Tennessee?

Holt: Morrystown, Tennessee. Then he went to Livingstone College in Salisbury. He graduated from there and then went to Howard University to Medical School. During the years he was there at Livingstone and at Howard, he worked on the railroad during the summer time, right up until his senior year in medical school, and he met a fellow named Mr. Day.

Greenawalt: How do you spell that?

Holt: D-a-y. . . who was a candy maker in Morrystown, New Jersey. Now, from what I have been told years later, they had this formula for making chocolate. Later on. . . and they and Hershey had been friends or partners, or something, in the candy business. So my father worked for Day. . . during the summers, for the last two years he was in medical school, and later Day helped him in many other ways get on his feet. During the time my father was going to school. . .

Greenawalt: Let me just try to get this in some sort of time frame. When was your father born?

Holt: I think Papa was 62 when he died in '49. I think he began to practice medicine here in 1918. During this time, he also educated. . . he sent. . . at least he helped his brother and sister go through college; one later became an outstanding minister in AME Zion Church; the other came and was a teacher here, and both died relatively early of TB. Out of eight or nine children, my father was the only one who ever lived to get over fifty.

Greenawalt: . . . And then your mother?

Holt: . . . and my mother died in '64. They must have been married here in 1918.

Greenawalt: She was a local person?

Holt: No; she was from Nashville, and an interesting thing there: my father happened to meet my mother when she came. . . my grandfather, my maternal grandfather, Richardson, was this official in the Masons. The Masons had this big convention here, and at that time it was at Hopkins Chapel Church over on College Street and my mother came as her father's secretary, and that was when my father and mother met, and then a year or two later they got married.

Greenawalt: I think you touched on all of the various lines except your paternal grandmother.

Holt: I never knew anything about her at all. In fact, it's something my brothers and I have said that we are going to get together and start tracing down a lot of these things, if the three of us can agree on something.

Greenawalt: I've lost track here about how your father got to Asheville.

Holt: He was born in Asheville. His father came to Asheville as the head of this gang putting in the. . . they put down the ties, the wooden part of the railroad.

Greenawalt: The railroad coming from Swannanoa Gap into Asheville?

Holt: Coming up the mountain; apparently it came out of Spencer; out of Salisbury.

Greenawalt: Yes; it did.

Holt: So, for that day and time, as I understand it, he was very affluent in the black community, because I suspect, at that time that was, possibly, among the highest paid avenues open to a black person.

Greenawalt: Do you happen to know where your father was living in those years?

Holt: Yes. As a little boy, as the railroad used to go westward, there used to be a little shack that sat up on the hill. Just a little shack, maybe a little larger than this room, and that was where my father was born. As he grew older they lived in a larger house on Hill Street, and then later, a larger house on College Street, and I don't ever recall those.

Greenawalt: This leads us just about to your generation. You were born. . .

Holt: . . . September 5, 1921.

Greenawalt: Where do you come in the line of your siblings?

Holt: I was first.

Greenawalt: You were first. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Holt: I have two.

Greenawalt: Sisters?

Holt: Two brothers. I was born in '21; my brother Charles was born in '23, and my brother Cecil was born, I think, in '26.

Greenawalt: Were you people born at home?

Holt: No; we all were born at the Blue Ridge Hospital

Greenawalt: Why don't you tell me about what sort of education you had in Asheville?

Holt: I think, to a certain extent, I had a somewhat unique education. We lived on College Street; on the corner of College and Furman. Directly across the street from our home was Hopkins Chapel Church. Diagonally across from our back yard was the Allen School. At that time Allen School was one of the excellent private schools for blacks in the whole country, but it was a girls' school. As I understand it, four of us were the first black boys to go to Allen School. I think I started school when I was either three-and-a-half or four, and went to Allen for the first three years, I think, then that was as far as they would allow boys to go, and I transferred from there to Mountain Street School, which is now Herring School, and from Mountain Street to Stephens-Lee, and I finished Stephens-Lee in '37. Then I went to Morgan State.

Greenawalt: Let's stop here for just a minute; you raised questions in my mind about the Allen School, and you might be able to answer. Did it have much of an impact in Asheville, or did it appeal chiefly to boarding students?

Holt: Over the years, ninety percent, probably, of the students . . . and this goes even 'way back. . . probably were boarding students, and yet, I think it was always considered in the black community here,



Holt: (Cont'd.) that it was a kind of special thing to go to Allen, versus the public school system. After I finished Allen, then they began to take boys. I think each class had a few more, and my youngest brother went all the way to the sixth grade at Allen.

Greenawalt: So Allen went through the twelfth?

Holt: Allen went through the twelfth, but took boys only to the sixth; that was the highest they allowed boys to go.

Greenawalt: I remember hearing the Allen choir at one time, and I guess it was quite active in going around to the various churches, singing.

Holt: Not only that; they had a reunion in the Summer of '78, and they had graduates in all kind of professional fields all over the world. Their graduates have really been outstanding. During the years Allen was running, it was considered to be one of the outstanding small, private, church-run schools available for blacks.

Greenawalt: It was a Methodist Church . . .?

Holt: Um,hum. Everybody knows it as Allen Center now, but those were the school buildings. They weren't the school buildings that I went to, but they were the school buildings they were using.

Greenawalt: What led you to pack your bag and take off to Maryland to Morgan State College?

Holt: At that time that was going North, and I just wanted to go North, and Morgan happened to be a very small school, and it was a church-affiliated Methodist school and there had been two other

Holt: (Cont'd.) fellows, Luther and Herbert Harding, from here had gone there and had done well, and although it was not my family's desire that I go, but that was what I wanted to do, and since I was just fourteen when I went, it was quite an experience.

Greenawalt: Did you find yourself unusually young at fourteen, or was that average?

Holt: No. There were two factors: I started. . . I was young, not necessarily bright, but I was young, but I started to school early, and at that time at Stephens-Lee you only went to eleven grades to graduate, and since I was born in September I was nineteen when I graduated. *[From Morgan State College]*

Greenawalt: What led your parents to put you, as a three-and-a-half-year-old boy into school? A lot of parents like to hold on a little bit longer than that.

Holt: One thing: my parents knew everyone at Allen; they were always over at our house, and my father was the physician to the school, and I was not the only one. There must have been eight or nine black boys that went in to the first grades with me at that time. They were all older than I, but I was a big boy for my age and I passed for being much older during the time I was at Morgan, too.

Greenawalt: Let's hold your career at Morgan for just a minute and back up and ask something about your father, who was practicing in Asheville at that time. You mentioned that he was school physician at Allen. What other sort of practice did he have?

Holt: He had a general practice in Asheville from the time he started until the time he died, but one of the unique things about my father. . . and this goes back to his history. . . as a boy, he and Dr. Pritchard worked together on the railroad, and became very good friends. Pritchard later came back to Asheville and became an outstanding surgeon, and Pritchard and Anderson founded Aston Park Hospital. There was an understanding, from what I remember my father telling me, that Pritchard had always said he was going to do this: he was going to have his own hospital, and when he had his hospital Papa was going to be a member. This is an actual fact: my father was the first black person to be a full-fledged member of a private hospital in North Carolina, and he did that right up until, I guess, probably in the forties, when they opened the Asheville Colored Hospital and then they closed Aston Hospital to blacks at that time.

Greenawalt: Had Pritchard passed from the scene by then?

Holt: Pritchard passed very early, but Papa stayed on the staff, I guess, up until. . . in fact, I suspect he was even on the staff up until the time he died, but the historical tragedy thing was that he was the only black doctor who could admit and treat patients in that hospital.

Greenawalt: So he was the exception to the policy?

Holt: He was the exception to the policy, and yet it helped him in his medical practice tremendously. One thing: over the years he gave anesthesia for the hospital for all of the surgeons, and it threw him in close contact with this small group of doctors that worked there,

Holt: (Cont'd.) and probably made him a better doctor in his contemporary practice at that time. Some of the doctors. . . and I was not aware of this when I was growing up. . . but when I came back to Asheville, Dr. Belcher and Dr. Justice and Dr. Nailling (who knew my father very well; Papa helped Nailling get on his feet early in surgery) they all said that he was really an excellent physician, and an unusually astute diagnostician. I think this experience there helped him; it all came from this childhood friendship.

Greenawalt: What led him into anesthesiology-- at least, doing this part-time at the hospital?

Holt: He did it part-time during the hospital, and years later Dr. Ambler, who was the anesthesiologist here, told me that Papa was just fantastic with ether, and when the new things started to come out a group of them, surgeons there at Aston, tried to get him to go back and just go into anesthesiology, and yet, at that time, anesthesiology was not a specialty. At one time, I think, he went for a month to McGill, or something, in Canada. But it was never a major part of his practice. That gave him an indirect advantage over the other black physicians at that time and at one time Asheville had seven black physicians. During the time I was born, during those early years, there was a Blue Ridge Hospital located down on Clingman Avenue, and I think all of the black doctors at that time belonged there.

Greenawalt: Do you recall the names of these seven black doctors?

Holt: Later on, I think they reached seven, or thereabouts, in the early forties.

Greenawalt: I guess one of them would be Dr. L.O. Miller?

Holt: Dr. Miller and my father started off at about the same time. They even started as partners for the first year; that must have been around 1918. After that time they practiced separately, but remained good friends. Before they came back, there was Dr. Walker, who was my father's uncle; there was a Dr. Bryant, whose home was where Jesse Ray's funeral home is; Dr. Thompson, and apparently two or three others, whose names I don't recall, who were already practicing here in 1918 when Miller and Holt came. Following that, there was a Dr. White, Dr. Gallego, and later Dr. Harrison came for a while. He is still here. A Dr. Hoskins and Dr. Michael. Michael, Harrison and Hoskins left for World War II, and only Harrison. . . Harrison and Michael came back. . . I think at that time, the seven would have been Holt, Miller, Gallego, White, Harrison, Hoskins and Michael. But that was up in the thirties and forties. During the time, I'm not certain about the year, but whenever Aston Park started, which must have been in the twenties, I guess, then Papa was on the staff and sent his patients to Aston. The other black doctors, after the closing of the black hospital, the Blue Ridge Hospital, the other black doctors had to send their patients to Mission Hospital, but could not treat them. Years later, I think some of them got the privilege then of admitting patients and then following them through. But over those years, my father did have a unique advantage.

Greenawalt: Let's return to you at Morgan College. Did you ever

Greenawalt: (Cont'd.) have any doubt about what you would be?

Holt: Oh, yes; (though I was big, I really was out of . . . I was the only one in my class from the South, and) I had an ambivalence that everybody in the family. (. . my father) assumed that I wanted to be a physician, and I guess maybe subconsciously I did, but the things I had seen. . . I had seen how hard he worked and I had seen him cry when people would die. Things like that. And I really had wanted no part of it, but a peculiar thing happened: when I finished Morgan I was accepted to Howard University Medical School, but at that time you had to be twenty-one, and I was only nineteen, so they accepted me for two years later, and this was right during the beginning of World War II, so, very cockily, I guess, I thought that was a kind of insult. You know how you are when you are eighteen, twenty, (through there. . .) you think you know it all. But I couldn't come back home, because my father was the examining doctor who was sending all these boys off to the war, and it was hard to explain that I was three and four years younger than most of my classmates had been, who had finished school here. So, therefore, in '42 I went to Western Reserve to school and I was there two years, and I was sent by the army to the University of Michigan for a year on the A.S.T.P. program.

Greenawalt: A.S.T.P.?

Holt: Yes; it was the army training. . . Army Specialized Training Program for World War II. I was there when the war ended; then I went to Brown University for two years on a fellowship.

Greenawalt: What were you studying at Brown?

Holt: Physiology; I finished my work on my doctorate at Brown and couldn't find a job. At that time there were only two places in the country that used black physiologists, or had any need for them, and that was Howard and Meharry. . . medical schools. So I ended up going to Texas to teach.

Greenawalt: Teaching where in Texas?

Holt: I taught at Butler College. . . that must have been about '48. . .'47. Then I taught three years at Tillotson College in Austin, Texas, and was head of the chemistry department there. Then in '51 I went to Jackson College in Jackson, Mississippi, which was the black state school, and helped set up the chemistry department out there. I stayed there a year, and that was when I decided I really wanted to study medicine after all, and the following year I went to Meharry, in '52.

Greenawalt: Did you spend the traditional three years there?

Holt: No; I spent four years at Meharry, and I finished at Meharry in '56. Then I interned at Chester County Hospital in Westchester for a year; then I spent two years in psychiatry at Embreeville State Hospital. . . No; I spent a year in cardiology at Hahnemann.

Greenawalt: In Philadelphia?

Holt: In Philadelphia; then two years at Embreeville; really three, but my third year at Embreeville they lost their accreditation.

Greenawalt: Where is Embreeville?

Holt: Embreeville is about ten miles from Westchester; between Westchester and Coatesville, and it was the experimental hospital for mental illness for the state of Pennsylvania. At that time it was one of the three leading hospitals in the country in drug therapy. It was far ahead of its time.

Greenawalt: While you were doing a lot of this study in Pennsylvania, at Brown, and elsewhere, had you made up your mind to return to Asheville?

Holt: No; I returned to Asheville as a necessity. I was in my third year at Embreeville when the letter came stating that I had borrowed money from the state to finish medical school. . . this was from the North Carolina Medical Commission. . . and the agreement was that they charged you no interest the first year, and then started charging interest after your first year. I had been going on about five years. . . the internship; then I spent a year at Hahnemann, and I was on my third year at Embreeville, and by then I owed them . . . you know the interest went from eight to sixteen percent. . . so for the four or five thousand dollars I borrowed from them I owed them about eight or ten, and they told me they would send the marshals for me if I didn't come back to North Carolina to practice. So, in coming here, the agreement was you had to practice in a rural area of less than ten thousand, so the thing I worked out with them: at that time there was only one black doctor here and that was Dr. Harrison, I worked out that I could come to Asheville providing I had an office in Arden, so I had to set up an office in Arden and go once a week



Holt: (Cont'd.) there, and then set up an office here. Had it not been for that, I would have gone into psychiatry. The third year I was at Embreeville, when they lost their accreditation and I was the senior resident, then I became director of research, and that was during the time when A.S.T.O. mono-amino oxidase inhibitors were becoming the thing to use in treatment of depression. Some of the research work that we did there that was published in the American Journal of Psychiatry was the outstanding thing, for about four years, that had been done on a comparative basis of the four drugs that had been used at that time.

But once I got here, my plan was to come, work a couple of years, pay the state off, and go back. But I had underestimated the fact that you cannot raise a family and pay off any ten thousand dollars in two years. Then I began to get involved in other things here, and the family didn't want to move, and so forth, and I just got stuck.

Greenawalt: What year was it that you returned to Asheville?

Holt: Sixty-one.

Greenawalt: Sixty-one; and by then you had met your wife and had a family already started?

Holt: Yes.

Greenawalt: I want to make sure I don't get by this. Tell me something about how you met her.

Holt: I met my wife while I was at Meharry, so I must have met her in about '53; we must have gotten married in '56. It must

Holt: (Cont'd.) have been '58 when Johnny was born, because I was still in Westchester. That's my oldest boy. Then two years later, I guess about '64, my youngest boy was born here. My wife . . . [inaudible]. . . daughter who was eight, that I adopted, Jackie, so we have a family of three.

Greenawalt: You established a practice in Asheville then under some duress.

Holt: Yes; it worked both ways. It was fantastic how many people remember my father, and it seemed to me that apparently at some time or another my father must have treated about every black person in Asheville. (So, from nearly the day I . . .).

[End of Side A, Tape I]

[Side B, Tape I]

Greenawalt: That was a very fortunate position to be in, I suppose.

Holt: From that point of view, and yet I really left something that I had become interested in and was becoming really talented in when I left psychiatry.

Greenawalt: Was it much of a culture shock, if I may use that word, coming from that part of Pennsylvania to Asheville in 1960 or '61?

Holt: Yes; particularly since I had spent nearly all of my adult life in schools, in academic atmospheres; either going to schools or teaching. The atmosphere, even at Embreeville, was more scholarly. Really, it was more like a college campus than a hospital.

Holt: (Cont'd.) To a certain extent, it reminded you kind of like Highland, here. On the other hand, it was not the shock that you might expect, because I really was coming home, where I was pretty well known, and saw quite a few people who I had gone back to school with. Every year, during all of these years, I would always come home in the summer time. I did come at a time when apparently another black physician was needed.

Greenawalt: How many black physicians were there in 1961?

Holt: One.

Greenawalt: Just one; that's amazing that earlier there had been seven, and by 1961 the number had been pared back to two, with your addition. What was responsible for that?

Holt: Many things. This was one of the things Illinois State had been investigating, as of '75. In 1940-something there were around three hundred and fifty black physicians in North Carolina; in 1975 there were about one hundred and twenty-five. Among the things: older doctors would die off; younger doctors would not want to go to small towns; this thing. . . many of the younger doctors would borrow money from the state, and rather than come back and have to go to some place less than a population of ten thousand, they would just borrow the money and pay the state back. . . or even not pay the state back, but wouldn't come back. That was an important factor.

There are other factors. One main one here in Asheville: the income of physicians in Asheville or in the Western part of the

Holt: (Cont'd.) state not as high as those in more industrialized areas in the Eastern part of the state, so therefore it wouldn't be particularly attractive. During that time there was very little social outlet for black professionals in Asheville, so it was not necessarily an attractive place if you had options to decide to come.

Greenawalt: Maybe we can rely on your memory of some of the earlier medical conditions in Asheville. What I would like to do is turn to the subject of health care available for blacks, and maybe back up here again. . . and we've already mentioned a few hospitals that were in existence, and I know that you were not, perhaps, personally affiliated with any of these, yet you may have some family memories, or whatever, that would help. There is an elusive hospital that some people. . . a lot of people don't seem to know about, and that was the Torrence Hospital, which was founded, I think, around 1915, on Hill Street. Do you happen to recall anything about that?

Holt: No.

Greenawalt: It was founded by Dr. William Green Torrence, and, as I say, it's elusive, I've not been able to find much about it.

Holt: That's the first time I've really ever heard of it, but I do remember the one . . . Blue Ridge.

Greenawalt: Let's turn to the Blue Ridge Hospital, then. You said that was on Clingman Avenue?

Holt: Yes.

Greenawalt: Apparently it was begun around 1922.

