

Interview with Larry Holmes
Conducted by Jordan Scott
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Jordan Scott: So I'm going to be conducting today's oral history interview. I have my two advisors with me, Dr. Brown and Professor Sabio-McLaughlin. We are working to develop a digital exhibition to engage the community and encourage them to understand more about the historical and cultural significance of Black heritage as it relates to agriculture and faith.

Larry Holmes: Okay

Jordan Scott: So, what is your full name?

Larry Holmes: Larry Spencer Holmes.

Jordan Scott: And where did you grow up, Mr. Holmes?

Larry Holmes: I grew up in King and Queen County, Virginia, a little small place called Newtown.

Jordan Scott: And what kind of stuff did you do for fun in Newtown?

Larry Holmes: Growing up, we, you know, played a lot of games. We, you know, hopscotch and hide and go seek. And walking through the woods, going down through the, you know, down to the swamp, down to the beaver dams things like that. A lot of outdoor stuff.

Jordan Scott: And what are your earliest memories related to farming?

Larry Holmes: So, I guess farming. We always were growing stuff. Growing stuff goes back to when I was helping my father on the farm and we were--we used to raise a lot of vegetables. So, I remember doing that. We had the animals. We had chickens and hogs, guinea hens. We also used to raise sweet potatoes. As a matter of fact, all of my siblings, we all participated in the Virginia sweet potato show and sale and we always, each one of us, had our turn at winning grand champion sweet potatoes at the State Fair in Virginia.

Jordan Scott: That sounds very cool.

Jordan Scott: So how did you become aware of the Black Church Food Security Network?

Larry Holmes: I think initially, I had just retired, but I was doing some work with Virginia State University, and Dr. Heber Brown was one of the speakers at one of the events that they went to. And we had a mutual friend that sort of connected us and then we found that he was doing some stuff with, you know, markets and we were doing something with our church in

Maryland, and he found out about that, and asked if we could supply him with some vegetables for some of the churches he was he was working with in the Baltimore Maryland area.

Jordan Scott: So that kind of takes me into my next question, what crops and livestock is your primary focus?

Larry Holmes: Primary focus now are sweet potatoes and greens and watermelons. We do some squash, and you know, tomatoes, all sorts of vegetables, but the main focus now is sweet potatoes. We have about eighteen different varieties of sweet potatoes that we grow, and we also produce our own slips, and we sell a few sweet potato slips, too. We don't do any livestock anymore. You know, it's too demanding for us. We stopped doing that back when all of our all the siblings started working and were away from home. So, we phased that down and then we just do the sweet potatoes and primarily sweet potatoes and greens.

Jordan Scott: Have you noticed changes in access to fresh, healthy food for local Black communities over time.

Larry Holmes: Yeah, I've been hearing about it. And of course, there have been several studies I know there was a study done from some folks at Virginia State University on food deserts. Dr. Ronald worked on that several years ago, and then we were participating in a couple of food activities in Philadelphia where there was some food deserts. We took some vegetables up there to support some of what the community folk were doing in in Philly. So yeah, you've been seeing that quite a bit as far as access to fresh foods and a lot of times the fast foods are more accessible in some neighborhoods. And then organic foods were, you know, somewhat pricey at one point. And so a lot of folk, you know weren't, they didn't really support the organic stuff because they just couldn't afford it in some certain communities.

Jordan Scott: Do you own the land that you work on? And how did you come to obtain it or access it?

Larry Holmes: Yeah, we own. We have a couple of pieces. We got some land here in Virginia and in North Carolina. But what we have in Virginia, we own it. I own. My wife and I own one acreage, and then there's another acre that we have with my siblings, and that piece my grandfather acquired some land back, I guess, back in the thirties, I imagine. And papa got that land, and then my father and my mother added on to that. They purchased more land to add on to the piece that was left to them by my grandfather, and then my wife and I brought a piece added on to it, adjoined it so got a nice little piece of land in here that we own everything that we raise and stuff on.

Jordan Scott: What type of challenges were posed with owning that land? What was challenging about it?

Larry Holmes: Well, not, I don't know that we have too much challenge. It's some property, you know, came available and my father well, we've always. Let me back up just a little bit. I don't know much about how my grandfather acquired his land, but then he bought that back, probably in the thirties, and then my father, the piece that he bought, he and my mother bought, was later on, in like the late sixties, early seventies. But it hasn't been a real challenge for us, because we purchase land that's close by. I know that some others have had issues with trying to purchase land when they found out that it was African Americans trying to buy it then all of a sudden someone else slipped in and bought it from under them. So, I've heard of those stories.

Jordan Scott: And how do you think policies and agricultural programs affect Black-owned farms in particular?

Larry Holmes: Well, we've been trying to make some changes. I spent 40 years working for USDA. So, most of my career has been working for USDA natural resource conservation service and my final job there was I was Director of Outreach for the Agency and I participated on the staff, the National Commission on Small Farms, for the agency and we worked on small farm policy. After I chaired the Committee on Sustainability back when we were doing the doing that National Commission on Small Farms and so we came up with some special cost share rates, you know, for socially disadvantaged, and limited resource farmers to try to make sure that the policy that we put in place didn't adversely affect smaller farmers.

For example, when we had the EQIP, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, first came out, there was a there was a provision in there where you got points and based on your point you were able to get your application up to the front. But when they first came out you could buy points. If you could say, 'well, I would take less money in cost share if I could get my points raised.' So we brought it up to the officials and said that was discriminatory. It made a hardship for people who were small farmers or limited resource farmers didn't have the funds, the resources. Had just as much need, but they didn't have enough money to buy points down. So, they looked at that and made that change. But it's a matter of trying to stay up with it and trying to make sure policies and the practices that come out of USDA don't adversely affect limited resources of smaller farms.

Jordan Scott: Yeah, absolutely. So, I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit about the intersection between food, sovereignty and land rights and possibly some unique issues that Black farmers face. We talked about that a little bit earlier. You said you heard some stories about acquiring land and how that's been difficult for some people that you know.

Larry Holmes: Yeah, yeah, that's been an issue in some places where you know they, you get the land bought from under you. Also, that we've had some of our own challenges, too, with was heir property where there's no clear deed and property left to the heirs and you have maybe 30, 40, maybe a hundred people on a 10 acre piece of land. And it makes it difficult to, you know, to manage it. And then also to hold it. Someone in the family may want to buy it,

but then, if you get conflict then that becomes difficult how you're going to manage that. So, heir property is an issue that we need to take a look at.

Jordan Scott: And you talked a little bit about like initially challenges with people in organic foods versus like choosing fast foods and things like that. What do you think was something that kind of helped people become more on board with like organic.

Larry Holmes: I think people are beginning to be a little more health conscious and the more information out with the Internet information flow has changed quite a bit. Currently, there's a lot of people interested in growing their own stuff, you know, growing in backyard gardens and on the patios. So, there's a lot of interest now in people growing healthy foods and trying to but it's on a kind of a small scale but there's a lot an individual can do on their own to supplement, you know what they're getting.

You know, they can grow lettuces, you know, real easy spinach, and those kind of things very easy and squash. So, there's a lot of interest now, I think, in people being more health conscious and in trying to seek food, that they, better for them. And some of the churches also have been engaged in educating their congregations on healthy eating and trying to break the cycle of, you know, the fast food and the heavy, saturated fat foods and doing things more in moderation.

Jordan Scott: Yeah, we've seen that recently, like with churches in the area, and the Baltimore area and Johns Hopkins, and that education and that outreach, that's a big piece. So on the topic of gardens and things like that, do you think there should be more people starting their own gardens? And where should I start if I wanted to do something like that.

Larry Holmes: Yeah, yeah, I think more people ought to grow something. When I was a young fellow a hundred years ago, I lived in an apartment on third floor and of course I had my little garden up there in the pots and so I've always grown something. I think, you know for yourself, I don't know whether you have your living situation, but you can certainly use grow bags if you don't have a lot of land. You can use grow bags, which are really good because they're not very expensive, and you can move them around and, you know, adjust them in case the weather gets bad, you can bring them in and then take them back out. But yeah and try to grow things that you like, that you like to eat. But no, I would say, anyone who wants to grow something should do it, because that doesn't take a lot of space to grow something.

Jordan Scott: And what's the best way to support farmers like you? Is it with our time? Is it with our money? Is it with educating other people? Do we put our hands in the soil ourselves like? What can we do?

Larry Holmes: Well for us, I think you know, supporting, supporting. If we're selling stuff in supporting our products, you know, with the money for buying stuff from us. For me personally that would, you know, would help us: just purchasing from us. We've thought of, made changes in how we do things as far as you know needing a lot of labor. So, we've kind of

gotten that in pretty good shape now so we don't need a whole lot of volunteer help to do what we need to do on our farm. Some other farms do. Some other farms, you know, could use volunteer help to come in, and some farms do shares. You know, CSAs, and things like that. That's not the model that we've come up with.

But mainly supporting what we're doing and educating people on that farming is a business, you know the farming business. And we give a lot of stuff away, too. We give a lot, you know, we're benevolent. We give some things away, but we can't give everything away. It's not sustainable. We have to have some sales otherwise it's not sustainable, but we do give things away, and we'll plant some stuff in the neighborhood. Like I got a big field of greens now that's about ready to go to seed for the spring and neighbors come by and I just tell them, 'go get what you want,' you know, 'get what you want and feed your families,' you know. We don't need to get any money off of that. We've already made the money last fall off of them, so that the neighbors come in and get what they want and support the neighborhood that way.

Jordan Scott: What if anything has been the benefit of supporting and being a part of that black church food security network?

Larry Holmes: Oh, yeah. Well, yeah, that's the benefit for us has been exposure and getting to meet people and picking up customers that have been customers for us after connecting with the Black Church Food Network has been good. And then some of the work we did as far as putting products together and packaging them. It helped. It helped us to refine some of what we were doing and to try to make it work for them, which, if it worked for the Black Church Food Security Network, it worked for others as well. So just, the experience has been good and also connecting with people. We like meeting with people and talking to them.

And my brother and I talk about all the time with us. You know we tell a story when we meet people, and you know we're selling stuff, but for us it's more spiritual in that, you know. It's almost like a calling that that we connect with people and try to encourage them to eat healthy, to grow their own stuff, and you know, and just the whole thing about the families, trying to keep the family engaged and involved. So that's been a help for us and a benefit to that connection.

Jordan Scott: Yeah, could you tell me a little bit more about that spirituality aspect, and growing food and you know the spirit of this mutualistic relationship and like helping other people. What role does faith play for you?

Larry Holmes: Well, yeah, for us, you know, we grew up grew up in the church, you know a lot of ministers in the family. I think everybody in the family was a minister except me and so grew up that way. And faith when you're farming for us it's a big thing, you know, we have to have that. Even though we do some things like irrigation and things to try to mitigate adverse weather and manage, but even then you still have to have faith because if the system don't work, or if you get a lot of rain you have to still have to depend on your faith to get through. And also just the whole thing of connecting with family and growing stuff.

I remember back when I was working at USDA and there we had some coworkers that were having some difficulty and I would let them come down to the farm and it was like therapy for them. They could get away, you know, get away from the city, come out, and just be out there working and sweat, and I just call it healing ground. One field we had, I called it healing ground, because a lot of people have come through there and just going out there and just relax and just absorb that energy. Because there is an energy out there and it's you have to recognize it. Everybody don't see it. It's like looking at something, one person sees one thing, someone else sees something else, but if you're in tune with it, you know, you recognize it, and you can see it.

I remember one piece of land that my father acquired and every year we'd go up, my brother and my sisters and I, we'd go up, and my cousins and he'd have us to clean this lot off. And I'm wondering why in the world we cleaning this lot off every year we got to go and cut the trees down and every year they grow right back. And we clean that lot off every year for years and years. And he eventually built his new home on that site. And the site was the old foundation for an old schoolhouse and he built the house on part of this foundation. So, for us it was kind of like for him, it was like a spiritual thing. Every year we have to go do that. But his vision was way beyond what we could see. You know, he knew why we were doing it. We couldn't see it as young kids. We just knew to work. Work for us, we were getting tired, but for him it was a vision. So we were, you know, obedient and stuck to it. Now that we've gotten older, understand it better why he was doing what he was doing. So that kind of connection is sort of in us, those types of experiences.

And of course, my mother, things that she was doing, you know, through canning and preserving food and teaching us how to cook. All of us knew how to cook, cook and bake, and so, you know, my mother taught us all, all the children, how to do all that stuff, even boys. Boys and girls, it didn't matter. Everybody had to learn how to cook and grow something.

Jordan Scott: Yeah, that's really amazing. Just to backtrack a little bit. How many people are working on your farm right now, and how many siblings do you have?

Larry Holmes: Siblings, it was seven of us and two brothers and my sister passed. Yeah, and as far as what happened on the farm, it's seasonal. It all depends. Like, right now we're in the midst of bedding sweet potatoes. And so today I usually start the first day out by myself just to get a sense of being out there by myself and for me, it's my getaway, and, you know, get acquainted with what's going on and get started and tomorrow I'll bring in some help. We'll have probably be three people helping me tomorrow on to, you know, till the rest of the week. But it depends on what I'm doing, how many people are, you know, helping us on the farm.

And then my nephew, who's in college, he's gonna when he gets off from spring break he'll come out and help us. And my son and my grandson, my daughter, they'll come, you know schedule a day for everybody to come out and help, and my nephew and my nieces. So yeah, it's kind of a family thing.

And then we'll, but we'll schedule it. And you know some folk will come in and do what they can when they can. And someone actually, a few minutes ago, a friend of mine wanted to come and help, and I told him yeah you can come and help us on the farm. When asking about the, you know, breaks for lunch I said 'well, I usually don't take a break, but the way we work is when you want. If you need a break, take it.' You know we don't have any set time for anybody to take a break. If you need a break, take a break.

Jordan Scott: Is there anything that I should know that I haven't asked about already?

Larry Holmes: Let's see. Well, you mentioned that: what about you growing something. Are you interested in growing from growing some things?

Jordan Scott: I'm interested in growing some things. I do cook a lot. I'm interested in growing my own like herbs and things like that, maybe like some thyme, or like some mint, just to start out and get that experience of like caring for something and watching it grow and like flourish even in my windowsill.

Larry Holmes: Oh, yeah, you can do that. You ought to start. Actually, we did a little workshop last week, a couple weeks ago I guess it was, in a Germantown for.... And they showed them how to pot plants, you know, seed plants, and also how to how to pot something after growing up and how to repot it. And so by doing that, I think they want us to come back to another group and do something similar. My kids, I'm letting them set that one up. But yeah, you know, growing stuff, it's easy to do. You know, it's easy to start.

You don't want to start too big, because there are some challenges when you get out in the field because the pests. You got insects. You got animals that come through. You just talked a few minutes ago about the groundhogs that's coming up, and you have to make adjustments for those kinds of things.

I guess one of the things you may want to you didn't ask about that, maybe just came to mind is how do you manage some of the some of the pests that that come up. And so we don't use any herbicides, so naturally we have to try to fight weeds and our sweet potatoes taste different than other sweet potatoes. And my wife won't let me, and I won't do it anyway, but we don't spray any herbicides or pesticides on our potatoes and they just taste different. I mean, people all around say your potatoes taste different and better than the competition potatoes. So, and then you got animals to deal with like down here now we have of course groundhogs and when I plant my sweet potato bed I got some extra potatoes that I'll put a bed down close to where the groundhogs come out because they're gonna eat. So that's their bed. So they gonna have themselves a good time, but my good potatoes are a little bit further away, so they get pulled before they get to my good stuff. We're just making, you know, little adjustments like that we learn over time.

Jordan Scott: Yeah, I think that's a really good way to manage that. I never would have thought of something like that. But I kind of do work with like environmental science and stuff like that. So I'm really interested to hear about, well, if you don't use herbicides, what do you use. And you just got to put a little bit more thought into it. I really like that.

Larry Holmes: Yeah, yeah and my sweet potato bed, you know they got chemicals you can put down in the bed to suppress the weeds and things like that, but I put down, the way I do it, my covering will suppress the weeds. And then by the time the potatoes come up, they'll get a jump on the weeds, and I'm good to go. Then when I plant them, it's called for a little more, a little more difficult, and when, I'm trying to fight weeds and the weed population. So, it's a challenge. But we manage it.

Jordan Scott: Well, Mr. Holmes, those are all my questions. Did you have any other questions for me, or anything like that?

Larry Holmes: No, no, just happy growing. And if we can help you with anything you're doing, just let just let us know. And you know anything you want to question about growing stuff. Of course, the University of Maryland Extension Program got a wealth of information on growing stuff. So, I work with the Land Grant University some too on a volunteer basis so I got to put a plug in for the for the land grant universities, like the University of Maryland at College Park and also the University of Maryland, Eastern Shore. So, I mean for Maryland anyway, those schools you look to them for assistance.

Jordan Scott: All right. Well, thank you so much for this interview today.