Voices of Southern Hospitality: An Oral History Project

Interviewee: Fordham, Damon

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Abstract: In this interview, historian Damon Fordham discusses his experience as an African American person who grew up during the shift between segregation to integration in the South. He highlights how his love of history has inspired him to to tell the true story about the past in order to dispel rampant misinformation in today's society. Fordham focuses on the differences in opinions held by black and white people, especially as pertain to the era of North American slavery and how those opinions can lead to pseudo-histories taught to subsequent generations. Fordham also warns about insincere southern hospitality and the separation between a person's behavior and their beliefs.

Biographical Note: Damon Lamar Fordham was born on December 23, 1964 in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Raised in Mount Pleasant by adoptive parents, he was educated in various segregated and integrated schools. At the University of South Carolina, he became interested in the field of history as a career. As a result, he started working with professors, writing newspaper articles, and doing radio shows. After graduating with a master's degree from the College of Charleston, he wrote several books and traveled the country providing lectures at various universities. His

current endeavors include a YouTube channel, a fourth book, and African American tours in Charleston.

Project Details:

In the summer of 2018, student researchers from the College of Charleston conducted oral histories for the research project, *Voices of Southern Hospitality*. The project documents diverse opinions and stories about southern hospitality in Charleston, South Carolina, but also offers a deeper and more intimate history of a changing community. Over the past thirty years (early-1990s to 2018), the Charleston peninsula and its surrounding islands have experienced rapid economic growth and rapid cultural and ecological changes. The *Voices of Southern Hospitality* project chronicles this profound transformation with the personal histories of Charleston residents.

The project was launched in June 2018 with funding from The Committee for Innovative Teaching and Learning in the Liberal Arts and Sciences at the College of Charleston. In addition to documenting important stories, the project was designed to train College of Charleston students in oral history research methods.

Interview Begin

[Interviewer Initials]: S.B.
Interviewee Initials]: D.F.

SB: All right. We are recording. It is June 29, 2018. Could you go ahead and state your name as the interviewee?

DF: My name is Damon Lamar Fordham.

SB: All right. And I'm interviewing him, Sylvie Baele. So we'll go ahead and get started now. My first question for you … to start at the beginning. What was your childhood like?

DF: Okay. Oh, there's a lot to tell. So what aspect would you like to know?

SB: Like a fond moment or memory that kind of characterizes part of your upbringing or I guess it doesn't necessarily have to be fond, but...

DF: All right. Well, first of all, I was born in Spartanburg, South Carolina on December the 23rd, 1964. I was put up for adoption immediately after my birth, as was common with out-of-wedlock births at the time. I didn't find my biological family until I was 35, but I was raised in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina by Pearl and Abraham Fordham. They were good people. My childhood was... first part of it was very happy. My father- my mother was a nurse at MUSC, Medical University of South Carolina. My dad taught history ... I'm sorry, he taught biology at Laing High School, which was the black high school in Mount Pleasant; it's today a middle school. And he was - and he loved to tell stories. Many of the stories were about history, and I would later be gratified to learn that many of the stories that he told me were things that I would find in history books as well as my classrooms and much later during research. The first half of my childhood was wonderful. I was in the second integrated class at my elementary school and all of that went fine and good until I was in middle school where I experienced a lot of bullying because I was a bookworm, very thin, rather unhip for lack of a better word, and so forth. So that wasn't so pleasant. And then I was exposed to racism in those days, especially after about the sixth grade or so throughout graduating from high school. But when I was at the University of South Carolina, shortly after my father passed in the middle of my freshman year, I met a professor, Willie Harriford of the Black Studies Department. And he was like a second father because he showed me that my interest of history could be a career for me, you see? And that's where I sort of found myself. Afterwards, my mother took a turn for the worst, so I had to return home and I took care of her for many years until she died in 2014. But while I was here, I began to work at the Avery Research Center with Dr. Marvin Delaney, which further refined my history skills. I wrote for a newspaper column and did a radio show with historical anecdotes. And that led not only to my getting a master's degree at the College of Charleston, it also led to me writing several books along with traveling around the country. I lectured at the University of Berkeley out in California back in 2013. I've lectured at the University of Memphis at a conference in 1999. I've spoken in Canada. I've done a number of things with the BBC radio out of England as well as a YouTube channel and currently working on my fourth book.

SB: Wonderful. I've seen some of your things on YouTube, and I have really enjoyed a lot of the things that you've worked on and I've used them myself already. So you

seem to be quite accomplished. A lot of the things you were saying coming back to Charleston, taking care of your mom are things that really resonate with me right now. So I really appreciate you sharing that. Now to kind of continue on, we're gonna kind of go into...

DF: Oh, excuse me. I also forgot that I mentioned that I've also been doing an African American history tour in the city since 2016.

SB: Wonderful.

DF: But I've also worked at other historical sites prior to that.

SB: Okay. And that's part of the reason I chose you for this interview because we're going to delve into tourism in a bit. But first I'd like to talk to you a bit about Mount Pleasant. So that's your home area.

DF: Correct.

SB: I think we both know it's changed a bit. How, in your eyes, has it changed since you were young and the last 30 years?

DF: When I was a child, Mount Pleasant was like Mayberry on the Andy Griffith show. I remember when I was seven years- eight years old in 1972, I looked in the encyclopedia and there were only 5,155 people in Mount Pleasant at the time. It consisted of several black communities, which now referred to as the Old Village, the original part of the Old Village. Then they had what was known as the Miles: Four Mile, Six Mile, Seven Mile, Ten Mile and so forth based on their proximity from Mount Pleasant. Those were by and large rural areas where you were more likely to hear the Gullah dialect spoken and you'd see the ladies with the baskets and so forth. And today that's considered a lot of historical importance. But at the time it was basically kind of stigmatized as being of poverty and then, you know, and being of a rural background, so forth, and it wasn't as celebrated by black people as it is today. The attitude then was quite different. My grandmother spoke very fluently, I might add. She called me in the house when I was four years old in 1968 by going, "Damon, y'all chern (children) too triflin', y'all better come on and [inaudible]" and things like that. Whereas if you had parents who were more upwardly mobile, they discouraged you from speaking Gullah, you know, it was considered a hindrance to upward mobility in

those days. So it was not celebrated as it is today until, I would say, the late 80s and early 90s which today I think is a good thing. Now, on the other hand, my relationship with whites was interesting because, as I mentioned, I first started going to an integrated elementary school in 1971. Prior to that I'd been to two segregated schools. There was a place called the Gaillard School on Line Street in downtown Charleston, where I went from 1969 to 1971 and Jennie Moore, which is today an integrated elementary school, was at that time the black elementary school in Mount Pleasant. And I remember that Jennie Moore in particular was interesting because a lot of the kids, they were rural and spoke Gullah and all of that. And at first, my getting along with them [was] somewhat difficult because as a teacher's son, you know, I spoke differently, but I later made friends with them. But what was interesting was on one occasion I later learned that my father came there one day and noticed that I was alone reading The Golden Dictionary, which was my favorite book in those days. And he asked the teacher why was I off by myself while the other kids were learning. And the teacher told him, "Well, Mr. Fordham, your son can already read and write, so he can't do anything with them." And it was because of that that I went to the integrated school, Mount Pleasant Academy, which was by and large a good experience even though I was one of the few black children… to my knowledge and the school had about 400 kids. I enjoyed myself thoroughly at that school because I connected with several teachers who, some were white as a matter of fact. They really saw that I loved learning and speaking and reading, public speaking and reading. And they kind of planted that seed in me and I had a wonderful time there. But then when I got to Moultrie Middle, it was a different story because you had the more rural black children, not the ones that I knew at Jennie Moore, but ones who, you know, had some serious issues growing up with pathology [inaudible] and such and the type of white kids that were commonly referred to as rednecks. And that school was a racial tinderbox in 1976. So, I dealt with the situation and the teacher, clearly, was not too happy to have us there in many cases. I remember in September of 1976, I was in the sixth grade and they had a dance for the incoming students and the DJ started playing "Enjoy Yourself" by The Jackson Five. And I saw a white girl that I knew and proceeded to do just that. I was 11 years old, we were kids, and one of the teachers just started having a panic attack and she came up to me, "What is your name young man?" And I'm terrified, I went "Damon Fordham. Why?" And then when she realized I had done no punishable offense, she got embarrassed and left me alone. But that

kind of stuck out to me, actually. And, you know, there were occasions where rocks were thrown at us and such when we were in white neighborhoods and especially when we were like the punier black kids, like bookish black kids like myself, we got the worst from the white kids. And then I had problems with the black kids because since I didn't speak so called black English and I liked things like music such as the Beatles and Elton John and all that along with some black music and had all these white friends, well, so I was sort of persona non grata among the black kids, which is sort of ironic because while these black kids were giving me grief, they were also giving me grief for having a very dark complexion. So, you know, I just couldn't win at that place. And my experience there was so miserable. Oh yeah. This was also the time that *Roots* came out, the television series, and that led of course to major fights among the black and white kids. So, the day I got out of that school was June the 7th, 1979, which I still celebrate as a personal [inaudible].

SB: I can only imagine.

DF: Right.

SB: So I'd like to kind of switch into... I think you mentioned- you told me what your occupation was earlier, and I kind of have an idea why you pursued the work based on your interests. Is there anything you'd like to add about why you're doing the work you're doing?

DF: Well, I found it interesting and I would find these things that very few people knew about and whenever I find these interesting things, it's almost like a good drug to me basically. So, I love sharing that type of thing. And so while I'm getting paid to research and find these things, I'm like a kid in the candy store; that's not work to me. But another reason I do it is because I'm very dismayed at all the pseudo-history and misinformation that has come to the public through the Internet and these various cable channels with all the charlatanry going on around and this lack of respect for real research and real knowledge. I don't like it. And I figured that my doing what I do with the YouTube channel and the books and the touring, all of that and the public experience, that's my way of lighting a candle as opposed to crossing the darkness.

SB: I like that. That's beautiful analogy. It makes sense.

DF: That's an old Chinese proverb Adlai Stevenson used to use. I can't take credit for that, but you know-- [overlapping conversation].

SB: It still seems fitting. How has tourism affected your present or past occupation?

DF: It's interesting because I did tours at Boone Hall in 2003, and that didn't work out very well because the guests there at that time did not want to hear an honest interpretation of slavery. So I didn't last there very long, and when it wasn't the white guests who only wanted to hear the *Gone with the Wind* and the good masters and that type of thing, I'd have black audiences who wanted to hear all the things that were out of *Roots*, you know, the whippings and lynchings and all of that. And it was very difficult to find a balance in that at that time. But I can honestly say that nowadays when I do tours, I get very little of that, most kind of coming in with some idea of what to expect even though the information is new. But every now and then I have to explain certain things to people because, for example, I've had one white gentleman who told me that, "Well, you know, for its time, slavery may have been a good idea" and I had to check him on that. Then another one who started praising Nathan Bedford Forrest, who was an early leader of the Ku Klux Klan and well, you know, that had to be straightened out. And another lady who, when I told the story of the tragedy at Mother Emanuel and I knew several of the individuals who were killed there very well, said, "Oh that, I forgot all about that." Well, you have to set people like that straight but still in a way that they don't storm off your tour. You know, you have to strike that balance. And then on the other hand, I had a black man tell me to the embarrassment of his wife, "Well, Mr. Fordham, I didn't see that in *Roots*." So I'm thinking, "Okay dude, dude, dude, it's television. It's a movie." [inaudible] And then there were the ones who got all this baloney off the Internet about black people being here before the Native American Indians and so forth, and this person claims she was "woke". And people tell me that they're woke; that's when I want to run because you know, 9 times out of 10, these so called "woke" folks are a bunch of jokes. But anyway. (laughing)

SB: So that one woman you just told me, that's interesting. I'm not sure how that quite would have happened.

DF: Well as I said before, you have a lot of, you know, there's a cottage industry of misinformation out now that plays to people's emotions. The White House, anyone,

and I'll leave that alone. But you get the idea that right now we're in a... I'll just flatly say, we are not living in intelligent times.

SB: No, and I think that's a big reason why these oral histories are so important because they're people's words, recorded. They can't really get too misconstrued, unless you're taking segments out, but they're going to be preserved, you know?

DF: Right. Not to go off topic, but I'm probably of the last generation who has spoken with concentration camp survivors, and very soon the generation who lived through Jim Crow will soon be no longer with us. And you already have Holocaust deniers and people who say Jim Crow was better for black people and all this stuff. And that's why what we're doing is so important because we have to correct that narrative before it's too late.

SB: I think that's true, and it's good to see someone as passionate as you are doing that work. What is your current opinion on tourism in general, maybe not specifically?

DF: Well, I have to say that in Charleston right now, we do a pretty good job for the most part. I mean there are people who are still stuck with the whole *Gone with the Wind* thing here and there, but I see it this way: you and I could see the same thing and have a different interpretation as long as we agree on actual facts. That to me, personally, is what's more important. But people are so hardwired into their beliefs right now, and these are often people who really don't know other history other than what's hearsay that they find the other side difficult to accept. But my thing is this: a person can give you their interpretation of facts, but it's up to you to do the real research if you don't think what they're doing is correct.

SB: That's true.

DF: But a lot of people, they think Googling is research and it just doesn't work that way. And that's one of the things I try to get people to understand that, you know, that if you don't read as... there was this lady named Azalea Johnson out of Abbeville, South Carolina who said this in the 1950s, "If you don't read, your mind is shackled to the battlings of others." And so it's up to the individual themselves to really get what the facts are. And facts do not always line up with people's agendas or opinions.

SB: This kind of leads in, I think, to our next question. If you could change something about the tourism industry here, what would it be?

DF: Oh, that's kind of hard to say. Gee, you know, I haven't really thought about it because with what I do, I'm pretty pleased with it. You know, there are different things out there for different people. If you want to do tours on architecture, there's that. If you want tours on the Civil War or the Confederacy, there's that. There's myself and Alphonso Brown and Alan Miller who do the African American tours and so on. You know, but one of the things about us I have to say is that because we have to do this exam to pass, we kind of agree on the basic facts. It's just really a matter of interpretation. And I'm with the idea of going through the test thing because the thing is, you know, this type of thing needs to be regulated. You can't have people up there just spewing a whole bunch of mumbo jumbo and misinforming the public. You know, you have to have some sort of way to rein people in on that, so I'm for that.

SB: All right.

DF: But then again, the fact that I took it and didn't do so bad myself might [inaudible] my opinion. (laughing)

SB: (laughing) So we're going to switch gears a little bit. So part of this project has to do kind of with this theme of southern hospitality, as it's called *Voices of Southern Hospitality*. Just broadly or impulsively, what do you consider to be southern hospitality?

DF: Well, you know, Harvey Gantt, when he integrated Clemson University in 1962-no 63, excuse me, said it best that "You may not get a South Carolinian to mind his morals, but you can always get them to mind their manners." And growing up, I've seen there's a lot of truth to that. Now I mentioned a little bit earlier that when I was a boy, it was not uncommon for them to chase us out of their neighborhoods, throwing rocks and such and riding by and calling us n****rs and that kind of thing. I mean, I went through that whole gamut of things in my youth in the late 70s and early 80s that to the youth growing up in our politically correct culture would just traumatize them now, you know. But I've seen the change in that. I mean, I seldom see that type of thing anymore at all really, or it may have to do with the people that I deal with. But the very neighborhoods where I used to have to run away from kids throwing rocks at

me are neighborhoods where I walk through today and all that people say to me now is "good morning" and "how are you doing". And so along with that, I remember how people would flip out if you were at a party and you danced with a white person or you were holding hands with a white girl or if a white girl kissed you on the cheek, or vice versa. I'm old enough to remember when that would just drive people nuts whereas today you can go into these country Walmarts, you know, even in rural Georgia and rural South Carolina and see quote unquote racially mixed couples with nobody making a big deal of it. Now having said that, at the same time, one of the paradoxes of growing up in the South is that you often deal with white people who will, as a person, treat you very decently but yet, their personal views on many things are rather abhorrent. For example, many of the young people I grew up with back in the 70s, who I'm still very good friends with today, a lot of them are hardcore supporters of President Donald Trump and his policies. And I have a lot of difficulty with that in many ways because it's that, you know, what this guy represents is largely, I feel, detrimental to myself and other individuals of color so to speak. But yet their personal relationship with me is as good as it ever was. So that's something that a lot of us who were black in the South have to struggle with.

SB: Do you think that there is behavior and beliefs that people consider respectful to talk about and some that people don't?

DF: Well, yeah. You know, the old adage of "Don't discuss politics and religion at the dinner table." That's very true in these parts because a lot of times people deal with things like this out of emotion and many cases if they don't have the historical background or the articulation to deal with these types of things, it can get pretty nasty and such. And so you have all these shouting matches and people cursing each other out over the internet, and it doesn't help when you have the type of media that you have where, especially, talk radio encourages people to deal with screaming and shouting for the sake of ratings. Let me give you a very good example of this. About 20 years ago I was on a right-wing radio talk show around here, and I thought it was designed to get me to talk about a trip that I'd done, this documentary called *Where Do We Go From Here?* when we went to Mississippi and Alabama and interviewed people from the civil rights movement. They wanted to steer the discussion toward this acrimonious debate about the confederate flag and I wasn't there to talk about that, but I managed to handle my own. But the guy, his name was David Barrow and

he's recently deceased. He told me flatly that his job was to make these phones light up in the studio and people to call so they get ratings. So the whole thing was to play on their emotions and hit their emotional button points. But that's dangerous to me and very irresponsible because you see, you know, I learned many years ago the danger of playing on people's emotions. Do you want me to get on that for a second?

SB: Sure. Go ahead.

DF: Alright. Because many years ago, in 1979, when I was 14 years old, there was a black leader out of North Carolina named Golden Frinks. And in Chester, South Carolina, there was a kid named Mickey McKinney who was killed. Well, Golden Frinks was going around saying that this black kid had been lynched and castrated because he was dating a white woman. And these people were marching up in Chester, South Carolina over this, and James Clyburn, who was at that time over the Human Affairs in South Carolina and who's now our state representative, he smelled a rat and investigated it and he found out from the undertaker that the guy was never castrated or lynched, that he was hit by a car. But this guy was trying to make a name for himself by lying about it and Clyburn exposed him. And he was run out of town basically after that; he died sometime in the early 2000s, this Golden Frinks fellow. And I learned from that the danger of emotionalism. And I vowed that when I became a man, I would never try to get ahead by playing on the negative emotions of the people. And so, to this day, I've avoided that kind of thing.

SB: That's very respectable, I think. Anyways, this interview isn't about my opinions, but thank you for sharing that.

DF: Well, you know, there is such a thing as having a conscience.

SB: Yeah, there is, that's true.

DF: You know, and the vast majority of people, you know, in life, there are few leaders and many followers, few teachers and many students, and a person of conscience and intellect has a responsibility to, if they're in a position to lead or educate people, to do so in a genuine and proper direction and not exploit them for their emotionalism.

SB: Right. Hospitality we were talking about earlier, southern hospitality, do you provide this experience to others and how?

DF: Well, as far as the whole southern hospitality thing, that's basically how we're raised: opening the door and pulling out chairs for women and all of that. At least those of us of a certain generation, you know, the "please" and "thank you, ma'am" and so forth. And when I go to restaurants and the waitresses and the counter ladies call me "sugar" and "honey" and all that, well, I grew up with that. I like that, you know, so at least while some people may privately hold abhorrent views, their treatment of you is one of decency to where you don't necessarily see people who don't think as you as these green-eyed monsters or wild inhuman beasts or anything like that. They just happen to be people who think differently than you, but they are not the Adolf Hitler, Osama bin Laden type monsters. You see some of the humanity in them, and I think that a lot of that kind of helps a person to see that humanity, that basic decency in others.

SB: Right. Being able to treat people decently. You gave a couple of anecdotes about times, walking into cafes and waiters being kind or greeting you certain ways. Is there a time or personal story you'd like to-

DF: Of the opposite?

SB: No, no. You'd like... I mean, sure. When yeah, I guess when you felt southern hospitality was provided to you or, I guess, wasn't?

DF: Well, as far as southern hospitality, you know, it's so normal to me that I don't think of it as such, but I will give you a couple of aberrations from that, though. Well, one example, Myrtle Beach in about 2000, I believe it was, I was doing a research project up there and I was in this little rundown motel on Ocean Boulevard right along the Atlantic Ocean. And you know, it was a crummy little motel without room service. So I went along Ocean Boulevard looking for something to eat and I saw this place with this flashing neon sign "Beer and Steak Dinners." And I said, "Oh, okay, I can get with this." So I walk inside the place and there's this huge confederate flag on the wall and there's Billy Bob and Homer Gene and Cletus and all the good old boys playing hardcore country music. And I walk in and everybody turns around and looks at me. So I figured, you know, "Am I going to trust these people with fixing my food? I

don't think so." And needless to say, I didn't bother to try that, but that was a very rare aberration within the last 20 years or so.

SB: I can't imagine that would feel like a very welcoming place to get dinner.

DF: That's why I didn't get dinner there because, you know, I knew from older relatives who were involved in sit-ins and my father's experiences in the Second World War with this type of thing, that you don't do a sit-in by yourself. That's just suicide.

SB: Right. No you don't. Do you think that southern hospitality or these ideas, this behavior here, has it influenced the growth or development of tourism in the Lowcountry?

DF: It does because you know, while here, children are raised to look you in the eye and speak at you and such and acknowledge your presence even if they don't know you. And that's missing in much of the rest of the United States. So when people come down here and see that, I definitely think that's a bonus.

SB: I would have to agree. How do you picture, as a final question, but we can certainly talk more if you like, but so how do you picture or think the area will be like in the future?

DF: Well that depends on how far it is in the future. I don't like the gentrification and the destruction of old neighborhoods because while you cannot freeze time still, you know, it comes a point that where are people who are of low income going to live? You can't keep pushing them out permanently. They have to have a place to live and we really have to really see about that. And you can't let southern hospitality mask sinister motives, you know. While people are nice to you, that's one thing, but you have to keep both of your eyes open that you're not dealing with wolves in sheep's clothing because that's often the reality, too. You see? But the thing is, when my parents- my parents who raised me, that is, were born in the 1920s, they were old enough to remember when radio came out, when people still used horse-drawn wagons and outdoor toilets and no running water and that type of thing. And by the time I came along you had television and automobiles, and I was born the year the "Colored" water fountain signs were taken down and so forth. So the world that I was accustomed to was something totally different than what they were accustomed to.

And now I see the friends that I grew up with who are just horrified at this new age and I have to often remind them and see, that's one of the things I think that's good about studying history, it gives you the perspective to say, "Well, guess what? Your parents felt the same way when we were kids and vice versa. You just become your parents." And a lot of people don't like to hear that.

SB: No. Well, thank you so much for doing this interview with me today.

DF: You're very welcome.

SB: I'll keep you updated on what happens with it.

DF: Okay.