

Interview with Dr. Maureen S. Thompson

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJXC0X7CCys>

Maria Zyla (interviewer): Good morning. We are here today with Maureen Thompson. This is our first Millennium interview and we are so happy to be with you today. You could introduce yourself a little bit.

Dr. Maureen Thompson (interviewee): Sure. Hi, Maria. Well, thank you for having me. My name is Maureen Thompson, and I graduated with my PhD from FIU in 2023, and I have to start by thanking and commending the FIU faculty, the History Department professors were wonderful. I learned so much from them, both as a student and as a teaching assistant. Minus the pandemic, I had a wonderful experience.

MZ: Right, of course. Well, I'm really interested in your experience at FIU. So that was one of my first questions. How did your academic experience at FIU with both your dissertation and your public history internships...how did they prepare you for your current work as a public historian at the Central Alabama Veterans Healthcare System?

MT: So, I worked very closely with my advisor, Ken Lipartito, and he told me and other students about opportunities that were available to them. So, for example, he told me about the Business History Conference, which operates primarily out of the Hagley Museum in Wilmington, Delaware. And through the Hagley Museum, I was able to apply for fellowships. I received a grant to conduct research there and I actually attended the dissertation colloquium in Mexico City in 2022.

MZ: Very cool. Can you tell us a little bit more about your other public history internships that you've had in your time?

MT: Yes. Okay. So we took public history courses, including oral history with Dan Royles, and I applied to many scholarship. I'm sorry, many internship programs. And I just want to tell everyone: "Don't be discouraged. You're going to apply to a lot and you'll be selected for a few, but every time you fill an application, it's a good experience." So, my first internship took place at the Black Archives and it was during my second year and the PhD program. I found out about it through a course I was taking with Dr. Cornelius. It was called New Directions in Black History. And the director of the Black Archives came in and she spoke about internship opportunities. So, I decided to check it out. I applied and I was accepted there, and I learned how to process collections, which was a very valuable skill that I learned that I think earned me this job at the Central Alabama Veterans Healthcare System.

MZ: Definitely. That Black Archives are an incredible institution in Miami and I also really enjoyed that professors were always pushing us to go beyond the classroom and to really take these opportunities, get involved in the community. Are there any other public history internships that you have done during your time at FIU outside of Miami?

MT: Yes. So, then my final year, I signed up for the VSFS program, which is the Virtual Student Federal Service. It's unpaid, unlike Black Archives. It's unpaid, but it gave me very valuable experience because I was working with the Veterans Administration. I decided I could do that alongside writing my dissertation. It was my last two semesters, and it was only supposed to be 10 hours a week. So, I figured I could fit that in along with my writing and everything worked out well. So, don't overstretch yourself. I believe the Black Archives was also 8 or 10 hours a week. So, you want to have that experience, but you don't want to do it at the expense of your coursework, or with research. So that's very important. Try and do the internships early on or much later if you can. So, when this job opened, I had several of my mentors at VSFS call me to alert me about it and they encouraged me to apply for it. And I did. And there were 55 applicants, and I think because I had that experience with the VA already that I was accepted here.

MZ: That's awesome! A super encouraging story to hear also from a PhD student in history and it's really inspiring to me hearing all of those steps that you went through to get to where you are today and makes, you know, dreams possible it makes you really, um, really hopeful for you know really accomplishing any of the goals that you put your mind to even though it can be sometimes difficult navigating the job market as a...

MT: Yes.

MZ: ...a graduate but hearing your story was very inspirational to me. And I'm sure to all the others that will be watching this interview, but I have another question, and it has to do with your work at the Central Alabama Veterans Healthcare System. Can you tell us about your collaboration with the Alabama Public Television on the documentary that you did about the origins of the Tuskegee VA Hospital.

MT: Yes, I'd be happy to.

MZ: Thank you.

MT: So, what happened was about six months into my employment, I received a call from the history office. The history office was only created in 2020, and it is based primarily in Washington, D.C. at the Veterans Administration building, but because I am part of the history...because I'm a historian for the VA, I am part of the history team. So, someone from the VA team reached out to me and said, would you be interested in this? And someone had already started, but she was out on maternity leave. So, I said, should we contact Katie? I don't want to step on her toes. And they said, no, no, it's fine. You know. So, I contacted Jane Whitson, who was the producer for Alabama Public Television, and he asked me to come up with a reading list for himself and his crew and started with that. And then it came back to me with questions. We collaborated on the script. We went back and forth, and I would make recommendations for clarification and things like that. But it was a great learning experience. I had never, you know, been involved with the documentary production before. And, although it's a short video, 12 minutes, they filmed about 45 minutes of video and cut it to maybe like two, two and a half minutes, but there were many people talking, and they had illustrations and the video turned out great. Now, the name of the series was called "In the Margins." And it's about history that you

would not learn about in school, history that's not widely known. And of course, in Alabama, they focus on institutions and people in Alabama. But I have to say, I have great respect for Dr. Dorothy Fields, who created Black Archives because if she hadn't been interested in preserving that history of an underrepresented population, no one would have cared about the mainstream museums wouldn't have cared about it.

MZ: Yeah.

MT: Hopefully now, you know, years after, decades after she started it, people are. And I found the same thing about Tuskegee. There is so much that occurred here with civil rights, I would even argue that the Civil Rights movement began in Tuskegee and made its way east towards Montgomery and finally Selma.

MZ: All right. Yeah.

MT: Yes. Mm-hmm.

MZ: Tell us a little bit about the Tuskegee VA Hospital for people who are watching this that don't know the history about that.

MT: Right. Well, it was the first and the only VA hospital that was constructed for Black veterans, specifically those who were returning from World War I. And, from reading and, you know, primary documents and from reading books, I thought I had a handle on what racism was. But, when I moved here, I understood that I didn't, did not understand just how the depth of persecution was. So, that was very eye-opening to me. It turns out that veterans will go to white hospitals, I'll call them "white hospitals" with white doctors. And there were two waiting rooms typically, and the doctors would make the rounds. They'd treat the white patients first and the black patients would have to wait. So, if it got to be five o'clock in the afternoon, they'd be told, come back the next day. And it might happen again and again, so they didn't receive treatment for days and sometimes even weeks. And, you know, sometimes it was an urgent matter that had to be taken care of.

MZ: Right.

MT: These soldiers came back from Europe, from being overseas, fighting for democracy, only not to experience it here in their own country. And they also came back with weapons, which really scared or created fear in the local population. Actually, veterans were targeted. This is a book that was put out by the Equal Justice Initiative called *Lynching in America: Targeting Black Veterans* and is actually available online, the Equal Justice Institute.

MZ: Very interesting.

MT: Yes, yes. And they have a whole wing of the Legacy Museum here in Montgomery, which I'd encourage everyone to see, that's dedicated to lynching. And again, they were seeking out veterans. So, veterans are very despondent, and the Veterans Administration realized the need for a hospital in the South. The NAACP rejected discrimination and segregation in any form.

MZ: Right.

MT: However, in this instance, they understood that these Black veterans needed medical care, and it wasn't going to happen in the South without having their own hospital. So, they acquiesced, somewhat, to having this hospital built. Later on, there was a fight over whether it would have a white staff or black staff and there were three different directors of the Veterans Bureau before it was the Veterans Administration. And they would tell the white population, yes, there'll be white physicians and white staff and then they would tell the president, actually the president of Tuskegee University, Robert Moten, who donated the land for the Tuskegee Hospital, that it would be a Black staff. So, later on, the hospital opened in 1923, by 1924 there was a huge warning campaign from the university people from the NAACP that put pressure on parting and then Coolidge to have an all-Black staff and it ended up with an all-Black staff between 1924 and 1954.

MZ: Okay.

MT: However, it wasn't easy to open up this hospital there was...there were threats from the KKK. They came and they marched on the property. The students and alumni at Tuskegee University, which was the institute at the time, armed themselves, because they were in fear that the Klan was going to come. There were 700 members of the Klan that came, and they threatened to burn down the university and the hospital. So, it got off to a rocky start, but once Colonel Ward was named as the first Black position and director, things went smoothly for the next 30 years and then desegregation occurred and then it continued as a segregated facility.

MZ: Right. That's amazing. Yeah, just not...I did not know anything about the history of the first Black hospital and, you know, all the trouble that people had to go through just to be treated, which is wild.

MT: Exactly.

MZ: These are soldiers that fought for "democracy" and come back and then are not treated with the same respect as their white counterparts. So, yeah, that was really eye-opening for me as a historian of African-American history as well, not knowing this, and that leads me to my next question, which is: How can documentaries like this one help educate the public, like you said, beyond the classroom about the understudied history of Black veterans and just overall the struggle for civil rights throughout US history? We learn mostly about Civil Rights movement and Martin Luther King in secondary school but that's about the extent of that and the story is super inspirational because it comes from a different perspective of Black veterans being the leaders, right? So how can these kinds of resources like documentaries help to educate the public about this rich history?

MT: Well, I find this to be sad, but people are reading less and less and even elite colleges haven't lowered the amount...reduced the amount of reading that students must do. So, most of my information, knowledge, I mean, it was processed through books and in the classroom and doing research. So, today, people tend to have shorter attention spans and even documentaries have

been reduced to bite-sized portions. The documentary appeared in was about 12 minutes long. However, with the internet, with YouTube, you can...you can, a lot more much more information and much more knowledge can be circulated publicly. And, of course, there's the translation opportunity too. So, people outside of the native language of the language that's spoken. So all this information can be disseminated farther across the public. And it is public history. With academic history, people are going to read a 700-page book. With public history, I was told to write articles for the VA history website at about a seventh-grade level, and it's not dumbing down history. It's just trying to make it available to the general public.

MZ: Right.

MT: So that they will be interested if it's text-heavy, they might pass, but if it's something that's enjoyable...if the short article has a hook, it'll draw them in and they'll learn about history.

MZ: Right. Yeah, that's an excellent way to make history more accessible and, fortunately, whether it's, you know, just not having the attention span, not having the time or the resources, I think documentaries like yours really open up people's eyes to the history of the country that they are from or that they immigrated to and I think that's one of the most powerful resources you could give, it's knowledge. Um...And so I'm interested: what public history or documentary projects are you working on now?

MT: Well, no documentaries right now in the works, but the Montgomery Hospital, which is about 40 miles away from here...they're celebrating their 85th anniversary next year in 2025. So, I've been put in charge of that...um... project. I work in the Public Affairs Office, so we want to make the public aware of the history, turn it into a celebration and understand more of the history. So, I'm also making either two or four banner display, the retractable banners. I'm working on that right now so that when people walk into the lobby, they can see a brief history of the hospital, you know, photos from 1940 when it was built and today with the additions, the wings that were put on and some pop culture tidbits like Jim Neighbors who played Gomer Pyle and is from Alabama. He sent a tele...telegram. So, this is dating it to the 19...in 1965 to the hospital to congratulate them and also there is a very list of people who visited the hospital, including the actor who played Darth Vader. And I learned all this by going through the guest list of people who signed in at the hospital. So, it's really interesting. You never know what you're going to find in addition to, you know, the history behind the scenes, you know, medicine, medical advances. One of the doctors who contributed to the heart pump and the artificial heart worked at the Montgomery Hospital for four years. And it was right around the time he started his own business. So, it's interesting to see how...

MZ: That's really hard.

MT: ...the innovation at the VA hospitals actually helped veterans and himself personally, you know, as a physician.

MZ: That's really interesting. What project would you work on ideally in the future? What's something that you would love to dig into a little more or have people know more about? Yeah.

MT: Sure. Well, before I answer that, I'm just going to back up a little bit to tell you about one other project that I'm working on. And that is...there is a dearth of information about the hospital: the personnel files are gone. So, I'm relying on photos and documents. Some of the documents have information, but most of the photos don't have people's names, dates, or events. A lot of times they were together for events that were occurring. So, I am opening up the museum to people to come in from the community and identify people, if they can, in the photos. I've been doing that. I did that twice already and I'm working with the local newspaper editor to publish photos weekly and see if anyone can name, you know, the people that are depicted in the photo and help to fill in that history. And to answer your question about what type of documentary...I'm already talking to a local filmmaker about pitching a project that I think would be very unique. Because the hospital and Tuskegee Institute, which is now university, employed so many Black professionals, it was...a region that some people called...was like a bubble or it was an oasis. And the children...I speak to the children who grew up here, who are now in their 60s and 70s and 80s. But anyhow, they talked about what an ideal place it was to grow up in. People like Lionel Richie, Robin Roberts came from Tuskegee, and they were, you know, in this milieu of Black middle-class excellence. There was this racist world outside in the rest of Alabama, but they were able to have their Boy Scouts and Girl Scout troops, Jack and Jill, organizations, everything occurred within probably a 10-mile radius of the hospital and the university and people had great paying jobs, they were educated, they're professionals. They formed the Tuskegee Civic Association and kept meticulous notes when they went to vote, how long...how many people went, how long they waited, and what the outcome was. They knew what the rights were and, you know, people that I'm...you know, I'm not saying there's a class war or anything, but people who are working two jobs didn't have the time to do this. So, it was the professional class, the middle class, that had the most at stake. And, so, I really would like to call attention to this time, I would say between, you know, post-World War II and the 70s, maybe go up as far as 1980.

MZ: Okay.

MT: And, also, another person I spoke to...he just retired as a pilot for Delta Airlines, and he grew up in Tuskegee. And Chief Armstrong, who was one of the Tuskegee Airmen taught him how to fly an airplane at age 10.

MZ: That's incredible.

MT: And he turned it into his career for the rest of his life. I really wanted to examine that middle class phenomenon that occurred here.

MZ: Yeah, that would be super interesting to do oral history with him.

MT: Yes.

MZ: Yeah, I really enjoy how you're really calling on the community and the public to be a part of the project and not just be right the audience or the audience those that are being studied. And I think that this is the aspect of public history that should be more explored, and I really enjoy

how you include the community, and you want the community to tell their story in their own words. And I think that's really incredible and inspiring. So, my last question is: What advice would you give to current graduate students in the field of history, not just at FIU, but in general. What can you what advice can you give us?

MT: Okay, so I'm on this side right now. But when I was on their side, the future was totally uncertain. I had no idea where I was going to end up with the exception that I knew that I would like to work in Washington, D.C, and I plan to work there someday. Maybe my next job will be there. I knew that I wanted to work for the government because the government is the largest employer of historians in the United States. So, keep that in mind. I'd like to tell them to think about opportunities outside of academia. If your total passion is to be a professor, I would say go for it. But if you...if you want to do something outside of the classroom, there's opportunities with every single government organization. At least for the time being.

MZ: Yeah.

MT: So, there's historians that...all the military organizations. There's historians at the State Department. You get a job with the Park Service. You can work for the Library of Congress, which is actually a post-graduating post...I'm sorry, post-graduation internship that I did, and it was paid. So, that was really interesting.

MZ: And what was that one all about?

MT: Look, you have to be proactive. The opportunities aren't going to come your way. It's not going to fall in your lap.

MZ: Right.

MT: I made sure that I used all the...all the programs that were available at FIU. So, towards the end, I went, I used the dissertation review. I also use the resume review. I used um...Let's see what else? Headshots. I got headshots done. And what's the other thing? Oh, mock interviews. So, take advantage of all of that. You're paying for these services anyhow; you might as well take advantage of them.

MZ: Okay.

MT: And look everywhere for opportunities. Any place you think you might want to work. Dig down. Make your openness known to other people, your openness for other opportunities. So, when I was in Washington, DC at the Smithsonian doing my research, the archivist there told me about a residency I could apply for. And I did the following year, and I was accepted. So, just let people know what interests you and they'll remember you when an opportunity comes up. Don't get disappointed. You're going to apply, like I said, for more than you're going to get but every time you apply, you're getting experience and you're getting better, your skills are getting better. Writing skills, expanding your resume. Also, just add to your CV one line at a time. Write a book review, present a paper, start with DOHGSA, you know. Go to the conference, attend the conference and present a paper, present your research. It doesn't have to be totally polished. It

could be this is what I'm working on and I'm thinking of going in this direction. Just let people know what you're thinking about and you'll get very positive feedback.

MZ: Yeah.

MT: And they might say, well, try this book. Try the source. Talk to people in this department. So, it really is very valuable to open yourself up to opportunities and let people know that you're looking for these opportunities.

MZ: That's excellent advice. Yeah, simply putting yourself out there is, I think, the first step, like you said, to being...letting others know that you're open, right? And I think one of the piece of advice that you give even starting with a conference that's at your university, like, just put your research out there and you'd be surprised how, you know, nice people can be really want to help you and, you know, want to see you succeed. I had one last question because you said that you had a...You did an internship after you graduated that was the name of that one or did we already talk about that?

MT: Okay, so it was AHHA. The Advanced History and Heritage...I can't remember the last initial, but anyhow it was about a six-month program with the Library of Congress, and I was still living in Florida at the time. It was virtual and I did receive this position before the internship ended. So, I asked my supervisor here, if I can finish, if I can complete the internship of Library of Congress and she acquiesced, so I ended up doing that and coming here in December, after the program finished in November. What I did for that project was I read the Blair Family Papers and the Blairs were very politically connected, rich family that lived in Maryland, right outside of DC. I read their letters to extrapolate information about the slaves, the enslaved people that they owned, and their family's members owned. And they had family that stretched into Virginia as far as Philadelphia. And they wrote each other often and fortunately, I can read cursive, even very messy cursive handwriting. And I think that helped me with that opportunity too. And I also provided analytics. I tried to come up with an Excel spreadsheet of names, ages, which family member they lived...I'm sorry, which part of the family they lived with...just any kind of information. And if I could come up with a narrative of their life, that was really important. I tried to put that together. So, it was a really great experience again and underrepresented population. I've always talked to community college. I've always talked from bottom up. You know, we know about the people at the top, but we really need to learn more about the people who created the nation, who did everything on a daily basis, who produced the people that were the great people. It's really important to know what was happening on a granular level with each of the classes and I just try to find unrepresented people in history.

MZ: Wow, that's super interesting. I'm sorry, I just asked you more and more questions just because I'm really interested in all these different opportunities, internships that you took while writing your dissertation, which in itself is already a difficult task but, yeah, just understanding that doing...taking these opportunities when you find them is so important if this is the...the route that you're interested in going in and I just wanted to really thank you for taking the time to talk with me today and just being super inspirational, not only for myself, but I'm sure for many

graduate students that will be watching this and thank you so much for all the work that you do as a public historian and thank you for taking the time today to answer my questions. Yeah, thank you so much, Maureen.

MT: Well, thank you for having me, Maria. And I'm open to people contacting me. If you want to provide my contact information, I'm very happy to talk to people about opportunities that I know about that are out there and if I can guide anyone, I'm happy to do it.

MZ: Awesome. Great. Thank you so much for talking with us today.

MT: Sure, sure. My fellow Panthers, I am here for you!