

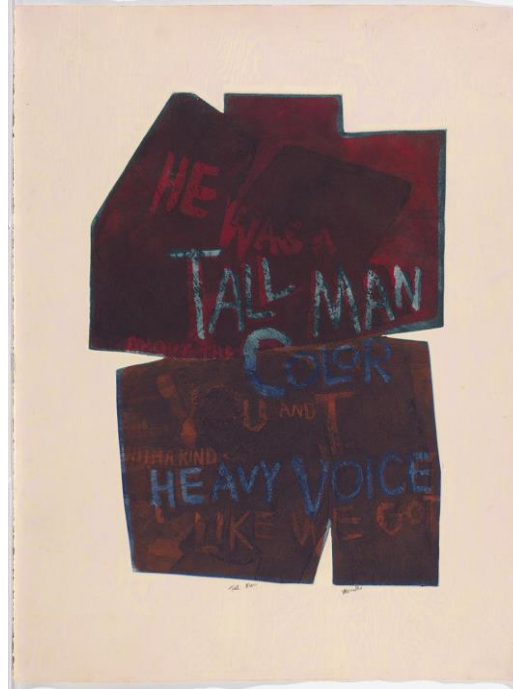
Transcript

**BENJAMIN
WIGFALL
& Communications
Village**

Jun 17–Sept 10

VMFA

VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS



EXCERPT 1/WORK 1

JAW:

Uh, he was a tall man, about the color of you and I but a kind of heavy voice like we got. Yeah, he was tall.

END TRANSCRIPT



Excerpt 2/Work 2

JAW:

And my father's oldest brother stood 6'8½" tall, weighted 286 pounds. And his—now, I saw Uncle Henry. That's my father's mother's brother. He stood about the same. Now, one of the two times I saw Uncle Henry, his mother's brother, we was playing in the yard and my father looked up and said, oh—said to my mother—her name Lurcrecia, he called her Creesie. "Oh, Creesie, look yonder come—that's either brother or Uncle Henry." He didn't know which one it was 'cause they're the same size, you see. Tall—and I was about like as old as your girl. And we were playing in the yard and he reached down and picked me up and took me in his arm and sat me on his knee, and I played with him, talked with him. And he came once more. He passed them, you know? He was an old man.

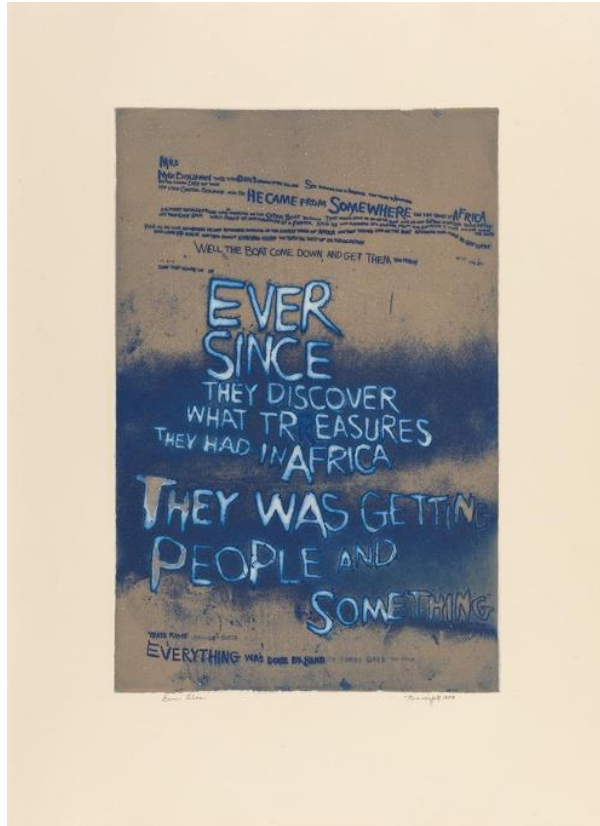
BW:

He wasn't fat or anything?

BW:

No, just tall—large and tall, long, large. This was John.

END TRANSCRIPT



EXCERPT 3/ WORK 3

JAW:
Mike.

BW:
What was his last name?

JAW:
Huh?

BW:
What was his last name?

JAW:
Benjamin.

BW:
Mike Benjamin.

JAW:

Mike Benjamin. That's who Ben is named after, see, Mike Benjamin.

BW:

Do you know about his father?

JAW:

No. Uh, see his father died in Arkansas. They moved to Arkansas and his father died out there. He was General Benjamin. Well, his—he came from somewhere on the coast of Africa. His first recollection was working on the cotton boat, you know. They would have to go on the boat and unload cotton overseas somewhere and then come back. But finally, he was purchased by a farmer.

BW:

From—directly from Africa?

JAW:

No, he was purchased by a farmer from the boatsman, I think whoever owned the boats, yeah.

BW:

You said he came from the west coast of Africa. Did he come directly here or did he come down the Caribbean first?

JAW:

Uh, no I don't think he — as far as he could remember he just remembered working on the shores there of Africa and then taking him on the boat and bringing him here to get cotton and carry it back, and then finally staying here. Yes, that's the best of his recollection.

BW:

Well, what did they do in Africa on the boat—

JAW:

Well—

BW:

They didn't take cotton over there.

JAW:
Huh?

BW:
They didn't take cotton over there.

JAW:
Well, the boat come down and get them, you know.

BW:
Yeah.

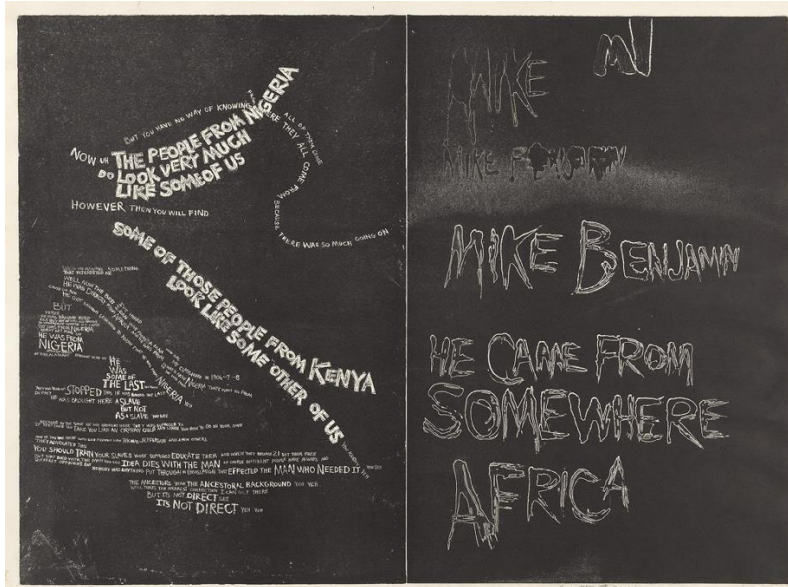
JAW:
See, they always—well, it was they discovered what treasure they had and they was getting people and something, yeah, yeah, from there.

BW:
Loading the boat.

JAW:
That's right, loading the boat. Everything was done by hand in those days, you know.

BW:
Right.

END TRANSCRIPT



Excerpt 4/Work 4

JAW:

What was your grandfather like, your mother's

BW:

Father?

BW:

Yeah.

BW:

Well, you'll

BW:

Well, your

BW:

Now, which grandfather?

BW:

Your grandfather.

BW:

My grandfather?

BW:

Your mother's father.

BW:

Uh, he was a tall man, about the color of you and I, but a kind heavy voice like we got. Yeah, he was tall.

BW:

What did he do?

BW:

He was a—he was a farmer, mm-hmm.

BW:

And what was his name?

BW:

Mike.

BW:

What was his last name?

BW:

Huh?

BW:

What was his last name?

BW:

Benjamin.

BW:

Mike Benjamin.

BW:

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BW:

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BW:

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BW:

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BW:

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BW:

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BW:

Well, the boat came down and get them, you know?

BW:

Yeah.

BW:

See, they always—well, it was they discovered what treasure they had and was getting people and something, yeah, yeah, from there.

BW:

Loading the boat.

BW:

That's right, loading the boat. Everything was done by hand in those days, you know?

BW:

Right, right.

BW:

And –

BW:

Do you know whether. There's a great question about that whole thing, that whole slave thing, and that is whether or not—we know that the slaves were brought over from the west coast of Africa.

BW:

Yeah, mm-hmm.

BW:

But there was slavery inside of Africa.

BW:

Oh, yeah.

BW:

Slavery inside of Africa. And so, we don't know if sometimes whether some of the people who were brought over from the west coast actually came from the east coast.

BW:

From the center, yeah, that's right, that's right.

BW:

Now, many people thought that, you know, our ancestors, that most of us lived—or the tribes that we came from were the tribes which are on the west coast.

BW:

Yeah, but they have no way of –

BW:

That's not necessarily true.

BW:

Not necessarily. They have no way of knowing where all of them come from, because there was so much going on. Now, uh, the people from Nigeria do look some—very much like some of us; however, then you'll find some of those people from Kenya look like some other of us, you know?

BW:

Right.

BW:

Yeah, yeah. And, uh –

BW:

I was just wondering if we could—I've never heard—'cause I think it used to be a thing in Black families that people didn't talk that much about, you know, past and so forth. I've never even got any whispers of any kind of Africa. And this is the first time I've heard of any kind of African connection—

BW:

Yeah.

BW:
—directly from—

BW:
Uh-huh.

BW:
Sure. But it always—something always

BW:
I thought maybe you may have heard something in your family background or something.

BW:
Well, now, the best I've heard I think was from a man by the name of Joseph Vance Ida, and Joseph, Jr. was my classmate in public school in 1906, 1907, 1908 and 1909, 1906, 1907, and 1908. He was directly from Africa, and he was from what is now—he was from Nigeria. That's where he was from, was—he got enough learning to know that he was from Nigeria, yeah. But, uh, he would was brought here as a boy, but he was old enough to understand. He was from Nigeria, heavy set man. He was from Nigeria. And, uh—

BW:
By that time, he wouldn't have been brought here as a slave.

BW:
He was. Yeah, he was brought here to slave. He—he was some of the last—you know, it kind of stopped.

BW:
Right.

JAW:
He was some of the last.

BW:
Mm-hmm.

JAW:

In fact, he was brought here a slave but not as a slave, you see, because he was—by the time he was here there was supposedly—if they take you, take you like an offering child and learn you how to go on your own. Now, in this time, that was—like Thomas Jefferson and a few others, they advocated this, you should train your slaves. You're supposed to educate them, and when they become, set them free. But that died with the man, you see. Died with the man, 'cause different people have always had different opinions, but nobody had anything put through in their legislation that affected the man who needed it, you see?

BW:

That's right, that's right, that's right.

JAW:

So, it was like that. But that's really the best direct information I've had from the ancestors, because I've been in company with Africans over there in Detroit.

BW:

Yeah, I was trying to—I've had contact with Africans

BW:

Yeah, but the ancestors, yeah.

BW:

But I'm—

JAW:

The ancestor background, yeah.

BW:

Where—you know, this is within my own family, I was trying to see how far back I could go.

JAW:

Yeah, well, that's nearest the connection I can get there.

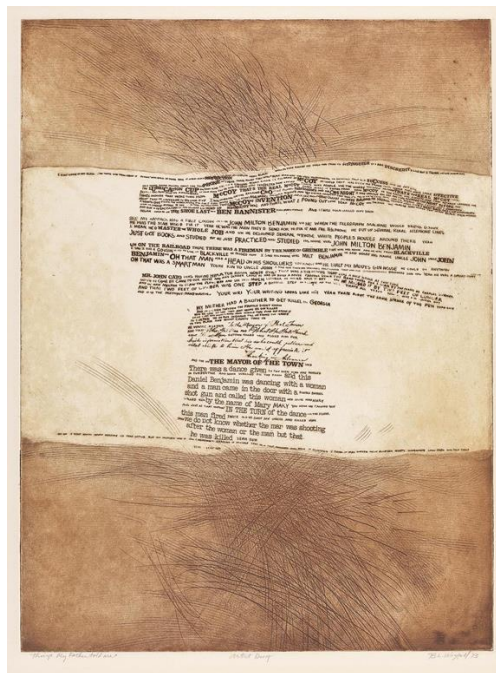
BW:

Your mother's

JAW:
But it's not direct. It's not direct, you see, yeah.

JAW:
Yeah.

END TRANSCRIPT



Excerpt 5/Work 5

James Andrew [JAW]:
I don't know. One thing about it, that—way back in those days, there wasn't much restrictions placed on a person as being Black. As time rolled on, then they tried to distinguish, you see.

Benjamin [BW]:

Yeah.

JAW:

Discredit, yeah. But I think he was a white guy.

BW:

Yeah.

JAW:

I think you're talking about the telephone.

BW:

That's right.

JAW:

Yeah, that's right. There was a Black man that was very instrumental in bringing that to a success. And, uh, just like the lubrication cup on your car and on an engine, that's a man by the name of McCoy.

BW:

Trains had them too?

JAW:

They had them on a train. That's when it was more expected because they didn't have a lot of engines. They didn't have an automobile at that time. He was a man who..... That's why people used the word, you know, that's the real McCoy.

BW:

Oh, that's—that's what that was?

JAW:

That's where that word come from.

BW:

Was his name Coy or McCoy?

JAW:

McCoy. That's the real McCoy. That's what it comes from, Real McCoy. And you

know it was a white man that actually learned me about that, uh, caused me to look it up. I was working on the railroad filling lubricators, and one night—I had worked all day and I worked the night before, and a white guy filled the lubricators for about four hours, and one of the mechanics said, “A white man should never take your job. That’s your job anyhow.” Well, I didn’t understand what he meant at first. He said, “Well, that’s McCoy’s invention, so that ought to always belong to y’all,” you know?

JAW:

Well, then I went back and I got a dictionary and got an encyclopedia and started looking up who McCoy was. And that’s what I found out, yeah. Yeah, McCoy was a man. And there are many things that Black men actually began such as shoe. Ben Banister. Yeah, many things. And people way back. See, my mother had a first cousin, John Milton Benjamin. He—when the telegraph machine would break down, he was the man who would fix it. Yeah, he was the man they would send for to fix it, and the telephone. He put up several telephone lines. I mean, he mastered the whole job. And he designed several of those white people’s houses around there, yeah. Just got books and studied, but practice and study. His name was John Milton Benjamin. On the railroad there, there was a fireman by the name of Grumble. That was his name, and he was from Blackville. I said, “I had a cousin that used to live at Blackville. He’s passed now. His name was Benjamin.” He said, “What’s his name?” “Uncle John, Uncle John Benjamin.” He said, “Oh, that man had a head on his shoulders. You know, he built my daddy’s gin house. He could do anything. Oh, that was a smart man. You kin to Uncle John?” I told him that was my mother’s first cousin and my grandfather’s brother’s son. And yeah, he was a smart man. Mr. John Cato was having him a 10-room house built. That was a big house. It was a nice house at that time. And he came by—he came to our house and had dinner, ‘cause he had, uh, built a house further down the road there for a man by the name of Charles Gunner. And he had Milton to draw the plans off and see how much lumber he would have to buy. And he missed it by two feet of lumber. And that two feet of lumber was one step, a bottom step, on the slope of the hill. That’s all. Yes, sir. Yeah,

he was a wonderful guy and had the prettiest handwriting. Your writing looks like his.

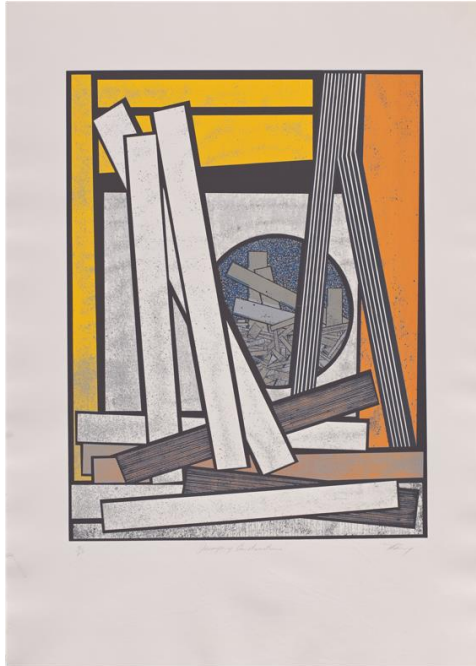
BW:

Oh, yea

JAW:

Yeah, it's like the same stroke of the pen. Yes, sir. My mother had a brother to get killed in Georgia, and she didn't—they didn't—the family didn't know how he lost his life. They just heard he got killed. So, find out about it. So, Milton, he inquired until he found the name of this place, what town it was in. He wrote a letter to the mayor of that town and told who he was and what he had heard about this man getting killed and asking for such information as he could gather and relayed to him, he would appreciate it, thanked him in advance. And the mayor of the town said there was a dance given by the men who had worked in and some worked on the farm. And this Daniel Benjamin was dancing with a woman, and a man came in the door with a double barrel shotgun and called this woman. Her name was Mary and called her by the name of Mary. "Mary, you hear me calling you," and this or that in the turn of the dance on the floor. This man fired twice and he shot my uncle and killed him. And he said, "We do not know whether the man was shooter after the woman or the man, but he was killed." Yes, sir. So, I don't know what come of it, but my mother had it and I remember reading it myself, yeah. A letter way back in the—I think about 1890, somewhere along then, way back there, yeah. Yes, sir.

END TRANSCRIPT



Mavis Pusey:

I love buildings that's been torn down. And though I hate to see them torn down, I— they have a sadness; they have an excitement about them that you—you will see sadness and yet you see forms, and movement, and emotion. And because I like them, I—I fantasize about what—what happened inside of them. This is a boarded building that's boarded up and been torn down, and you see that bricks are falling and different sections of the buildings are just sort of nailed together. The colors I use to create excitement and sadness because, um, it's like forms. Forms create excitement because of the movement you feel. You can see and the feeling it projects when you look at it. And maybe because I'm very much interested in it, I, um—I can see and feel these things. You walk along the streets—I go to some of the—the neighborhoods that have been torn down and look at them, and take sometimes—sometimes I take photographs of them, because to sort of get the feeling of the building and the forms that, um, the boarding up will do. This—the straight lines of the top is a part of another section you see, and it's like they are very positive lines. They're very straight, very positive, and those are the new buildings creeping up behind the old buildings that has been torn down. You will see a little bit more of that when you see the next part.

You don't have to go to the city, you don't have to go to any specific neighborhood or any specific place. It is right where you are and artists like... what should I say...

they record nature, they record the period you are in. When you are dead and gone. Most artists, and nowadays photographers, because photography is becoming very fine art, it is one of the things that captures everything at that moment. But you should try and observe. Don't just walk along and not look. There is beauty everywhere. You just have to look for it and find it. Make yourself find it. Make yourself look for it. And I imagine a lot of you here would like to be artists so take a pad and stick it in your back pocket and a pencil... and you can find art anywhere. You just have to look for it and make a note of it and work for it.

END TRANSCRIPT