

“OUT OF THE SOUTH”

FOR LESSON*Migration
Stories***NARRATOR** **Stacey Salimah-Bell**

SALIMAH-BELL So we have some family that's been here since the 19-teens, 1920s. They came up during the Great Migration out of the South. This portion of my family came from South Carolina, and surprisingly, they never went to Harlem. They bypassed Harlem all together. They settled in Brownsville on Thatford Street and they were able to buy a home there for two reasons: because when they went to look at the homes, which were just being built at the time, someone thought that they were Jewish, not Black, because they were very fair skinned, even though they had very curly hair. And they came from a family of landowners and had sold some of the land so that they could start migrating north.

RUN TIME **6:15**

STRONG Wow. So when you were young, your grandparents lived here, right, and had you had a relationship with them?

SALIMAH-BELL Yeah. By the time I was born, and even — my mom was born in South Carolina, but came to New York as an infant, and she had come because she had great grandparents — not great grandparents — great aunts and uncles that were living here. They were basically in Bedford-Stuyvesant. They were on Decatur Street, some on Bainbridge. And, so, yeah, my grandparents were already here when I was born. We lived in a brownstone, and we lived on the back of the second floor, and my grandparents had the first floor. My aunts had bedrooms the front of the second floor, and then we had family on the third floor and fourth floor, as well.

STRONG Did you also say that you had Gullah family members?

SALIMAH-BELL Yeah. My grandmother, Griselda, her mom was from the sea coast of South Carolina. She was from Charleston. And I remember going down to visit with her before my grandparents migrated back south, and I could never understand anything that she said. And at first, I kind of associated the way that she spoke with Jamaicans that I knew here. And at that time, there weren't too many West Indians in Brooklyn, but that was as close a relationship as I could find with anyone that I would hear speaking that way. And, of course, years later, we found out this was the **Gullah** culture. They — of course, they called it, back then, Geechee, which we kind of got away from that term. It was — at one point seemed to be a derogatory term. Yeah. But she was 100% Gullah. She made the baskets, which we have all over the house.

STRONG Wow. She made all of these?

SALIMAH-BELL No, no. She didn't make all of these.

STRONG Oh, oh, oh.

SALIMAH-BELL This is the oldest one that I have.

STRONG Got it.

SALIMAH-BELL And she actually taught me how to do it, but I don't remember. Yeah. So it's something that I'm trying to reclaim. My mom never learned, and even her mother never learned, because they were always working at that time, and it was something that you had to have time to sit and do. But I'm glad that she did teach me, and I have memories of canning fruits and vegetables with her. And we would sit out on the road and sell the things that she made. My mother and grandmother would be horrified when they came and they saw me sitting on the road with her selling things because they had come so far. For them, it was

GULLAH
descendants of Africans who were enslaved in the Gulf Atlantic Coast. Because of their geographic isolation they were able to keep more African traditions as compared with other African Americans. The Gullah language is unique; it is based in English and contains vocabulary from different African languages.

kind of like a step backwards to have me barefoot in the road with little pigtails, selling baskets and fruit.

STRONG [laughter] What was it like for you when your grandmother moved away?

SALIMAH-BELL Oh, I was devastated. I was 10 years old and I was absolutely devastated because I was at her house constantly. My mom went back to graduate school when I was probably about eight or nine, so my grandmother would come from Bedford-Stuyvesant because, by that time, we had moved out of her home. We were in Bensonhurst. And my grandmother would come from Bedford-Stuyvesant every day to pick me up from school. And then, when my mom got home, she would drive me from Bedford-Stuyvesant back to Bensonhurst and we would do the whole process all over again. On the weekends, I would basically spend the whole weekend with her. And it's kind of the same relationship that I have now with my granddaughter. Babysitters are hard to find, hard to trust, so if you can find a family member to do it, then that was the way to go.

STRONG So you also said that you would spend summers with her when she moved to South Carolina?

SALIMAH-BELL So when she finally moved back to South Carolina, we did go down for the summers. And I actually got to spend more time in the South than my mother did, because when my mother was growing up, her parents didn't want her in the South, going through the Jim Crow era segregation. By the time in '73, when my grandmother moved back, it had already — the Civil Rights Act had pretty much taken effect. You could still see some things going on because I remember going south and my cousins were telling me, "Oh, we're going to

school with White people next year." And I was like, "Hmm, well, I go to school with White people all the time." I'm like, "In fact, I'm the only Black person in my class." And they would ask me questions like, "Well, what are White people like?" I mean, they knew them, but they knew them from a distance, and they knew that they had a place, so to speak, and I didn't have that sense at all, being from Brooklyn. So, yeah, it was really strange. But I went back at a time — Alex Haley had just written the book *Roots*. And as a little girl, I remember reading this big, fat book. And when I went down, I told my grandmother, "Well, I want to find the Kunta Kinte in my family." And she's like, "Well, I don't know who Kunta Kinte is, but I can take you to cousin Cora [phonetic] and see what she can tell you. And so she would take me every morning to a different cousin's porch, and sit me down, and I would have a little pencil behind my ear, and a notepad, and I'd have my recorder. And it was a little tape player with a cassette tape. And I would record what they were saying, and I would ask them questions, and I got a lot of information about our family. I was able to get information about our family in the South probably back to the 1790s.

BIO Stacey Salimah-Bell was born in 1963 in Brooklyn. She was raised in the Bensonhurst neighborhood of Brooklyn. She spent more than twenty years working for the New York City Department of Correction, eventually rising to the rank of Captain. She was involved in a successful class action lawsuit against the New York City Department of Corrections for sexual harassment. She was a founding member of the American Muslim Law Enforcement Officers Association in 2001 and Muslims Employed in City Corrections Association, Inc. in 2006. She also served as Vice President for the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society Jean Sampson Scott Greater New York Chapter.

CITATION Salimah-Bell, Stacey, Excerpt from oral history interview conducted by Liz H. Strong, October 09, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.48; Brooklyn Historical Society.