**2025 Black History Moment** (3 minutes) **– Focus on Henry County, Georgia**

**Presenter: Solomon Barge**

3rd Sunday, February 16, 2025

My name is Solomon Barge. I was born and raised in Pensacola, Florida and

attended Alabama State University. I graduated in 1962.

After graduation I was interviewed over the phone for a teaching position in the Henry County, GA school system along with two other friends from Alabama State, Sam Floyd and Jim Adam., I was hired to teach in McDonough as an elementary school teacher (sight unseen).

In August 1962, I married my sweetheart, Delores and the next day, I boarded a bus to McDonough to accept this job and to begin my professional teaching career.

In 1962 there were 12 segregated schools in Henry County (10 elementary and 2 high schools). I arrived in Atlanta about midnight and transferred to another bus which took me to McDonough where I arrived at about 3:00 or 4:00 AM. The bus driver barely allowed me to finish stepping off the bus, when he abruptly left without returning my suitcase. Fortunately, I did notice a little bus-stop type shelter where a policeman was standing. I explained my predicament and inquired about a place to stay; but, of course, there were none. The Officer said I could sit and wait in a park across the street. I was tired and a cold. Needless to say, I was quite uncomfortable with this situation. The policeman did allow me to call the Henry County hiring school officer (whom I had to wake up and remind him who I was and that he hired me for this job). He promised to come pick me up. More than two hours later he arrived. He was completely dressed in a suit & tie and proceeded to show me around McDonough. Of course, at this time, all I wanted was somewhere to lay my head. He connected me to a lady with a house with a basement for newly hired school teachers. My two newly hired friends, Sam and Jim, were already staying there.

Eventually my suitcase was returned to me. Other than that introduction to McDonough, I noticed there were many black businesses and a lot of good warm-hearted people.

 Although schools in Georgia remained mostly segregated until 1968 when congressional Civil Rights legislation passed; in the early 1970s schools in Henry County were desegregated. The desegregation was a smooth transition. By that time, I had become a Football Coach and a Science teacher at Stockbridge Union High School.

After a few years in this position, I accepted a position at the Henry “County Office” as a Visiting Teacher where I visited schools to sort out issues. My wife did not want me to accept this job because of the dangers related to segregation and desegregation. However, the position afforded our family a little more in compensation and niceties. I remained in this position for 4-5 years. Then in 197\_\_ I was asked to come back to McDonough to fill the position of **Principal at Smith Barnes Elementary School, filling the role of First Black Principal of the newly integrated elementary school in Stockbridge, GA**. After several years in this position, I was transferred to McDonough Middle Schools where I stayed for over 15 years. I then transferred to Westly Lakes Elementary School until my retirement in 1998.

In 1971, prior to my installment, the **First African-American Principal of the newly integrated Henry County Senior High School in McDonough, Georgia** was named. Randall Deladio Ponder was born in McDonough, Georgia on August 24, 1940. He graduated from the Henry County Training School in 1957. He graduated Clark College in 1961 and he earned his Masters of Education degree from the University of Georgia in 1968. Mr. Ponder retired in 1991 as Associate Director of Regional Educational Services. He lived in Hampton County and died in 2008.

While much of the country, especially the southern states, were suffering violent resistance to desegregation; now looking back, I realize, Henry County was somewhat progressive for that time period.

Since 1962 many positive changes have taken place. Today, Henry County has black leadership in several areas including the Chairperson of the Henry County Board of Commissioners, Carlotta Harrell; three Commissioners covering District II, Neat Robinson; District IV is Michael Price, and District V, Kevin Lewis and four African-American County Mayors, including our own --- Mayor Anthony “Tony” Ford of Stockbridge, GA.

1960’s Henry County racial demographics:

Henry County overall population totals 17,619 residents

Black or African American population (Non-Hispanic) in McDonough = 56.4%

White (Non-Hispanic) = 36.7%

Asian (Non-Hispanic) = 3.4%

The 1960s, an era in the Civil Rights movement that was progressive as well as resistive. All matters were before the federal court system on issues related to discrimination, not limited to racial, social, housing, voting rights and public education. Several watered down Civil and Voting-Rights Acts were debated and narrowly passed which led to continued civil-rights work and legislation for positive steps towards the inclusion of Black Americans gaining their constitutional rights to participate in American life and county living.

Current Henry County demographics:

Henry County overall population totals 218,700 residents.

Black or African American population (Non-Hispanic) in McDonough = 72.2%

White (Non-Hispanic) = 37.1%

Asian (Non-Hispanic) = 3.31

*We are proposing a* **Year-Long Challenge**: Let’s get excited about our Black-American History. Share your little-known story or artifacts?

Wesley Chapel members and community, we are challenging you to independently learn more about our Black history. Then bring your findings to the Wesley Chapel UMC Archives & History Ministry to be included in the selection of topics for the 2026 Black History Moment presentations.