

**Barbara Hicks, Joseph Pinkett, Jr., Gilbert Pinkett, Reginald Davis  
Current and/or Historical Residents of Buttonwood (and Adjacent Areas)  
Route 9 Oral History Project**

Interviewed by: Michael Emmons, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware

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**Abstract**

Barbara Hicks lived in Buttonwood from her birth in 1933 until 1953, when she moved to the Southbridge neighborhood. She returned to live in Buttonwood in 2006 and lives there currently. Joseph Pinkett, Jr., was born in Buttonwood in 1934 and left the neighborhood in 1951 to join the Air Force. Gilbert Pinkett lived in Buttonwood from his birth in 1946 until 1965. Hicks and the Pinketts are siblings. Reginald Davis's grandparents bought a home along Route 9 in walking distance from but just outside of Buttonwood, which the interviewees note is bounded by Buttonwood, Lincoln, Railroad, and Arbutus Avenues. Davis lived with his grandparents and attended Buttonwood School beginning in second grade, moving away as an adult. He lives close by the neighborhood today. He was present for the first approximately 15 minutes of the interview. In this interview, participants discuss life in the small, Black neighborhood in the middle decades of the twentieth century and describe how it has changed through the years.

The interviewees describe how the neighborhood of their childhood was a small community composed primarily of approximately 30 to 35 mostly large, close-knit African American families, with many children who grew up to go onto college. They also characterize the Buttonwood community as close-knit. The Pinketts' parents—who rented their home in Buttonwood before buying it—and other residents had come from Wilmington and other parts of New Castle County, and they recall another family coming from southern Delaware. Residents worked in foundries, steel mills, at General Motors, and in the industrial area near the river. Many people relied on buses and had to go into downtown Wilmington for goods. Joseph Pinkett describes the neighborhood of their youth as “a little country place.” Barbara Hicks says residents had gardens and some kept pigs. Houses were small, they say, well-spaced, and arranged linearly. Indoor plumbing arrived only in 1948 or 1949, before which the community relied on wells and outhouses. The streets were paved and streetlights installed in the 1950s, after the Pinketts' father, a local activist and politician who served as delegate to the National Republican Convention, advocated for these improvements. Further advocacy brought additional services, like street snow plowing.

The respondents list families in residence in the neighborhood during their childhoods and identify George Pennington's general store on the corner of Arbutus Avenue and Route 9, the Buttonwood School, and the church—an older church and then its replacement built in 1947, where the interview takes place—as centers of their community.

Children in the neighborhood went to the Buttonwood School through eighth grade and went to Colonial School District for high school after desegregation. Some went to Booker T. Washington and Howard High. The kids in the neighborhood were engaged in Little League baseball as the

“Buttonwood Tigers” at the Buttonwood School’s ballfield. The interviewees remember playing sandlot football and engaging in Boy Scouts, which met at the school.

The Pinketts describe housing in their area as segregated and remember the open fields they would play in before the subdivisions were built. Gerald Pinkett had friends in Castle Hills and remembered being harassed in the neighborhood in about 1960 but continued to go see his friends. They note that Collins Park was not a place they felt welcome and recall kids from the development harassing them across the fence from the ballfields at Buttonwood School.

Over time, many of the houses in Buttonwood have been either heavily remodeled or replaced with newer builds. They describe a neighborhood with very few remaining old time residents and with fewer than half of the original houses. Current Buttonwood resident Barbara Hicks says she knows only about 20 percent of residents there now. Many of the old time residents return weekly for church services. The area nearby was developed for industry in the mid-twentieth century, but interviewees recall that the industry-related traffic worsened in the 1980s, prompting activism to erect a fence to keep the traffic from traversing the neighborhood.