In this oral history interview, Agnes Hildebrand Wilson Burgess discusses her educational experiences at Claflin and Elloree elementary schools through her graduate work at Temple University and The Sorbonne, her outstanding achievements as an educator, and her travels to France and Kenya. Dr. Burgess was the first African-American teacher to receive the South Carolina Teacher of the Year Award. Agnes Hildebrand Wilson Burgess, an educator, was born in 1914 in Chapin, South Carolina, to Rev. Benjamin Franklin Hildebrand Sr. and Agnes Brogdon. Twice widowed, Dr. Burgess passed away October 6, 2012. Tom Crosby interviewed Agnes Burgess at her home on January 18, 2007. Interview covers Dr. Burgess' education at Claflin University (grades 1-7) and the Elloree School in the early 1920s, Allen University (high school) from 1928 to 1931, as well as at Allen University from 1932 onward.
Tom Crosby:  Today is January 18, 2007. I am at the home of Dr. Agnes Hildebrand Wilson Burgess. So Dr. Burgess, what was your date of birth?

Agnes Burgess:  June 11, 1914 is my date of birth.

TC:  Okay. Now you told me some time ago that your dad was a minister, an AME minister.

AB:  Yes, an AME minister; a graduate of Allen University. My mother was a teacher and elementary school principal and a graduate of Allen University.

TC:  And then you entered Allen University?

AB:  Yes.

TC:  Do you recall the year that you entered at this time or you’re not sure?

AB:  I am not sure. It was 1932, I think.

TC:  I see. Now do you recall—I guess, since your father was a minister, he got moved around within the state, right?

AB:  Yes.

TC:  So you probably attended more than one elementary school?

AB:  I did, and elementary education was at very low ebb in South Carolina. My mother had a brother, who was pastor of Williams Chapel AME Church.

TC:  In Orangeburg?

AB:  In Orangeburg, and he had three daughters who were like sisters to me and I lived with him during the school term and attended elementary school at Claflin University. So that’s how I got started.

TC:  So you finished elementary at Claflin University?

AB:  No, I had to leave. My father was an itinerant minister and got sent to a town where there was supposedly a good public school and I left in the seventh grade.
TC: Do you recall the name of that elementary school that you attended?
AB: Elloree.
TC: Elloree School?
AB: Yes. It was for the name of the little town in which it was located.
TC: I see. So it went from, let’s say, the seventh or eighth grade through the eleventh?
AB: From the first grade through the eleventh.
TC: First grade, I see. So did you graduate from Elloree?
AB: No, I didn’t. It was not what my parents thought that it was in quality. I graduated from high school at Allen University.
TC: Excuse me, congratulations.
AB: Thank you. Yes, Allen had a high school.
TC: It also had elementary, too, at one point, right?
AB: Yes, but when I got there it had—.
TC: Only high school?
AB: Only high school, high school and college.
TC: So let’s see, I think you said you started elementary around 1932?
AB: I wasn’t prepared for that question.
TC: Okay. Do you recall about what year you entered Allen for high school education?
AB: Yes, I think that was 1928 and I finished high school there.
TC: What was your major at Allen?
AB: English and French. I had a double major.
TC: I see. Did you ever go to France?
AB: I did.
TC: I thought I heard that.
AB: I had a Fulbright. I’m a Fulbright Scholar.
TC: That’s very good. If I may tell you, when I was working on my master’s degree at Indiana University, during the summer I was a counselor, they call it, to the Fulbright students that came to the U.S. They came to Indiana for orientation.
AB: How nice.
TC: I worked two summers with that program.
AB: Yes, that gives us a common bond.
TC: It does, that’s true. I enjoyed it too.
AB: That’s a good program.
TC: It really was. Is it still going? I’m not sure.

AB: I don’t—I’m not sure.

TC: Each summer each of those two summers at least twenty-four different countries were represented. So it really was an education for me.

AB: France was one.

TC: I remember one student went to the University of Kansas. You know, they went to all parts of the U.S. So did you go to France with Fulbright while you were a student at Allen?

AB: No.

TC: That’s how it works now.

AB: It was a teacher exchange.

TC: Okay, I see. So you were teaching when you went to France?

AB: Yes, and a French teacher replaced—did not replace me, but came to the United States as the completion of the exchange.

TC: I have to make a correction here. I said that Fulbright works now at the undergraduate level but I’m not sure but it may work for post graduate too, I’m not sure. But that was post graduate for you. That was after college.

AB: Yes.

TC: But these were coming to the U.S.—I’m forgetting here. They were coming to the U.S., I think, as graduate students. That’s right, yes. That must have been a great experience for you.

AB: It was an answer to prayer and a great experience. I was teaching French and I wanted the experience of using it as a language, a spoken language because although I had a very competent instruction myself, it was a second, it was not conversant and I wanted to teach it as almost on the level of being a native speaker. And the opportunity to be in France as a student, a graduate student, afforded me that opportunity.

TC: That’s good. Of course, you know Dr. Elizabeth Bell?

AB: Yes.

TC: And she also has been to the La Sorbonne. I’ve heard her say so.

AB: That’s where I was, La Sorbonne.

TC: I see. Well, obviously I don’t speak it. [Laughs.] Once upon a time I had French at Allen. It was my foreign language.

AB: Who was your teacher?
TC: Mrs. Hollis, yes, Mrs. Hollis, and then I had another teacher. That could have been for French as well as literature. Do you remember the program Ozzie Nelson and Harriet?

AB: Yes.

TC: This man, he happened to have been a white man, and he told us that he had taught Ozzie.

AB: I see, how interesting.

TC: Yes.

AB: And you were at Benedict?

TC: Allen.

AB: At Allen?

TC: Yes.

AB: There was no policy or sentiment against teachers of any race at Allen.

TC: Right, and there still isn’t. That’s still the case. I had several white teachers at Allen and they were good. Now what were some of the activities that you participated in at Allen University?

AB: I was president of the, oh, I never did see (unintelligible). I carried the (unintelligible). I was also the president of the student body.

TC: And you were saying that you became Miss Allen University during your stay there at Allen?

AB: That’s right.

TC: Miss Allen was chosen or elected?

AB: Elected.

TC: Elected?

AB: Yes.

TC: By the student body?

AB: By the student body.

TC: Of course, they voted?

AB: Yes, they voted. There were certain requirements.

TC: Such as?

AB: Well, scholarship was one; dignity; the usual.

TC: The usual. And I think you told me you belonged to a sorority, didn’t you?

AB: Yes.

TC: What was the name of it?

AB: Zeta Phi Beta.
TC: Zeta Phi Beta?
AB: Yes, “finer woman group.”
TC: Excuse me?
AB: “Finer woman group” was our motto.

TC: Congratulations. Now do you recall some of the teachers at Allen during the time that you were there?
AB: The one who influenced me to go into languages was a Professor Ramsey. His home was Indianapolis and I don’t know what his school was. But he was exceptionally good.
TC: If I may ask if he was white or black?
AB: Black. And I had selected English as my major but he was my French teacher and he said, “Agnes, you seem to like French and you do well in it.” He said, “English teachers are a dime a dozen, why don’t you change your major or take a double major and they will be looking for you upon graduation?” And I did and they did.
TC: And now you have told me before that you did not attend a Rosenwald school.
AB: That’s true.
TC: However, I’m not sure.
AB: I did not attend the public schools.
TC: Yeah, I have a listing of all the Rosenwald schools for all the counties of South Carolina and I’ll check to see if Elloree is there.
AB: All right, you do that.
TC: Okay. So then after graduating from Allen you started teaching where, do you recall?
AB: Manning, South Carolina.
TC: Manning, that was high school?
AB: Yes.
TC: Now Manning High?
AB: Yes.
TC: Manning High is a Rosenwald school.
AB: All right. I was at the black school.
TC: Yes, right, so Manning High, it’s one of the earliest black high schools that got money from the Rosenwald Fund.
AB: I see. I think I knew that. I think I knew that at one time but that has been a long time ago.
TC: Right. And then you started teaching at Lincoln, is that it, after that?
AB: No, I taught there for four years and I married a Presbyterian minister who carried me to Spartanburg. Well, I met him I was teaching at Spartanburg. I left Manning Training School and was employed by the schools of Spartanburg and taught at Carver High School.

TC: Carver High?

AB: Yes.

TC: When you were there was it known as Carver High at that time?

AB: Yes.

TC: Someone told me that—well, this was a conversation that I had with someone who was saying that first there was what was called Cumming Street School and then they got a new one. But that was prior to your going there, evidently.

AB: Yes, I went to Carver, it was known.

TC: At Carver High School?

AB: At Carver High School.

TC: And then, you remember, there were games between Carver and Sims High, which was located in Union.

AB: Yes.

TC: And arch rivals between those two schools.

AB: Yes, they were.

TC: Yes. Now my school—I’m sorry, I graduated from Sims High School in Union, South Carolina, and you told me some time ago that you knew the person for whom Sims High is named and that person was Reverend Alexander Sims. I think you indicated to me some other things with reference to him.

AB: He and my parents were friends. I just assumed that he was at Benedict when they were at Allen because he would visit in our home.

TC: I see. Are you aware that he also was president of the Palmetto Education Association?

AB: Yes.

TC: You knew that?

AB: That slipped my memory. That was before I became a professional.

TC: I see. Yeah, he was president 1928-1930 with the Palmetto Education Association.

AB: Yes.

TC: Now after Carver did you continue to teach?
Yes, I had an (unintelligible) into Lincoln High School from Carver High School and I’ve been in Sumter ever since. I retired from Lincoln High School—well, not exactly. During my last year at Lincoln High School I was the South Carolina Teacher of the Year and that year I had to have a substitute because my travel load was very heavy. Everybody would squeeze me into this and that. Now what was the question that led to that?

I was asking, did you teach after Carver High School, and you were saying you did, at Lincoln High School.

Yes, at Lincoln High School.

And you taught English there?

French.

French?

Yes.

Both English and French or only French?

Only French. I’m a French teacher.

Right.

English and French were my double majors, but I taught English only in Manning, and from that time on I’ve been a teacher of French language and literature.

So after you retired from Lincoln High School, I think you told me also some time ago that you had done some teaching at the University of South Carolina.

Yes. That was a very interesting year. I was Teacher of the Year, South Carolina’s Teacher of the Year.

May I interrupt you at this point?

Yes.

Now did you become Teacher of the Year soon after the merger of the two teacher associations, that is the black teacher association and the white teacher association?

Yes.

That’s when you were Teacher of the Year?

Yes.

Do you know if any other person has, black person, has been teacher of the year?

I’m almost certain. Yes, I know that one person has. He’s not alive now.

Were you the first?

I was.
TC: You were the first black Teacher of the Year?

AB: I was the first black Teacher of the Year.

TC: After the merger? I see.

AB: Or any time at all.

TC: Uh-huh, and it kept you very busy?

AB: Quite busy.

TC: Did you have any particular objective or objectives during the time that you were Teacher of the Year?

AB: My objective was to give the best professional representation possible in the interest of my field.

TC: So you often times, I guess—I’m sure you were requested to give speeches and so forth?

AB: Yes, yes.

TC: At various schools?

AB: Yes, regardless of race.

TC: Do you have any particular special occasion that was very interesting to you when you were Teacher of the Year, anything in particular that stands out?

AB: Well, there was so much. I spoke at places and for situations in which it just wasn’t the usual thing (unintelligible) for a black teacher or black speaker. I probably spoke more frequently at that kind of gathering than at all of the gatherings, because if I had a conflict in that situation—. That was a most interesting year.

TC: I can imagine. Did you go out of state as part of let’s say, Teacher of the Year, any activities in which you went out of South Carolina representing Teacher of the Year for South Carolina?

AB: I don’t recall. I was being invited somewhere all the time.

TC: Now you also have said to me earlier how you became a teacher at University of South Carolina, how you got there. I think you mentioned McNair, Governor McNair, or was it Governor West?

AB: Governor West. He was on the board (unintelligible) and he cited my credentials and said that they would honor themselves by giving me a place. So they urged me not to apply.

TC: Who urged you, the white people?

AB: Yes, people who were in charge of education at the University of South Carolina. I went by invitation.

TC: From the governor?

AB: I went by invitation from the University at the governor’s request.
TC: I see.
AB: He thought that I was a good teacher and would do better in more ways than one.
TC: Did you do both graduate and undergraduate teaching?
AB: No undergraduate teaching.
TC: I see. That had to have been an interesting experience too.
AB: It was.
TC: This was like do you recall the year? It must have been like late ‘60s, mid ‘60s?
AB: Yes, (unintelligible).
TC: You don’t remember right now?
AB: My life has been such a blur.
TC: But you’ve been very active.
AB: Very active.
TC: Do you have any additional comments that you would like to make at this times in terms of your years of experience and teaching?
AB: Well, one outstanding situation was attending the World Confederation of Educators. I represented South Carolina.
TC: Where was it held, do you remember?
AB: Held in Nairobi. The president of the organization was French speaker so I served as an interpreter for the delegation from the United States.
TC: That’s great.
AB: It was a nice moment for me.
TC: It had to have been. It’s a nice moment to hear you say that.
AB: The president of the organization at that time was French and I had all of these delegates of the United States behind me (unintelligible) interpret. That was nice for more reasons than one.
TC: I can imagine.
AB: And it was also a very strenuous experience. The delegation from the United States was placed in one hotel for that world meeting and we were in a French speaking area and I had to get everything (unintelligible) United States (unintelligible). They led through my delegation and when we got ready to leave they made up I suppose it was a big purse and offered it to me. I wouldn’t accept it.
TC: You wouldn’t?
AB: No. I was paid. I’d already been paid. And we were all teachers, brothers and sisters in education and I was just having to make their life pleasant.
TC: Right. You have also gotten many gifts though through the years and that was a great achievement for you and you appreciated it.

AB: Yes, I felt that was the duty of a scholar.

TC: Right, to not have to be paid.

AB: That’s right.

TC: After you had been given a free trip there anyway.

AB: That’s true. And the very experience of having been invited there. I was paid.

TC: Right. Now another important thing in my opinion, when we talk about education in South Carolina usually the focus is on the public schools, you know, through the years.

AB: Yes.

TC: But also the private schools, the private college as well as private elementary and secondary schools, they have played a role in the process.

AB: They have played a role.

TC: And you have told me earlier as well as you said something this time a moment ago, some time ago today, that you attended two private colleges, part of a program at one of those colleges and one of those colleges was Claflin University.

AB: Yes, and did my elementary school.

TC: You did your elementary there.

AB: Uh-huh.

TC: And then after leaving Claflin you came to Allen University.

AB: Yes.

TC: And you came there at the high school level.

AB: I did.

TC: But it also at one point had elementary as well.

AB: Yes.

TC: So we have to also be thankful for the private schools as well as the public schools.

AB: Of course, of course.

TC: They’ve played a fantastic role.

AB: That was all the black people had at one time.

TC: Yeah, and you have mentioned to me earlier with reference to the cultural experiences that those schools provided.

AB: Yes.

TC: And do you recall any cultural experiences at Claflin?

AB: Oh yes, they had.
TC: And that was in your elementary years?
AB: Yes.
TC: Any noted persons came to campus do you recall?
AB: Yes. And they were not, see Claflin is a product of the United Methodist Church and their scholars were more strict (unintelligible ).
TC: I see. But when you got to Allen University.
AB: It was just the reverse.
TC: Just the reverse?
AB: And the auditorium at Allen, Township Auditorium was not there.
TC: So Allen’s auditorium?
AB: Accommodated cultural activities of for the black people.
TC: And Township had not been built?
AB: No, not when I went there.
TC: When you went there?
AB: It was built during my time there.
TC: I see.
AB: But it took a long time.
TC: Getting it built?
AB: For Allen University to (unintelligible ).
TC: Now who were some of the noted persons that came to Allen University’s campus?
AB: Marian Anderson for a concert.
TC: Roland?
AB: Yes, Roland Hayes. It was strange, his name was in my mind when you called. And there was another outstanding musician.
TC: How about Mahalia Jackson?
AB: No, Allen did not have gospel at that time.
TC: It did not?
AB: No, we were really classicists.
TC: I see. Something that when I was a student at Allen, Mr. Hunter, John Wesley Hunter was the choir director and now that you mention that it did not promote too much of the spirituals and gospel.
AB: It promoted spirituals but no gospel.
TC: Really? Do you know what accounted for that?
AB: Yes, spirituals were classics. Gospel was not.
TC: So it later became of interest to many persons.
AB: Yes and because of its root in the black culture, Allen relented. Allen relented under, I’m trying to think who the bishop was, Frank Madison Reed.
TC: I see.
AB: And we the alumni were disgusted that that kind of music should ever emanate from the roster and we challenged the administration and we would not attend.
TC: Really? And they did not put you out of school?
AB: Oh, I had left as a student.
TC: Oh, you were alumni, I’m sorry.
AB: I was watching not to express myself too freely.
TC: Right, so in closing, would you like to make any last comments with reference to your educational training and your educational career or careers you might say, at this point?
AB: My training was at a small school but it presented only the best.
TC: You are referring to Allen University?
AB: Allen University. I mean that’s where I got my bachelor’s degree. I did (unintelligible) at the Newberry Institution. But I had a classical background when I left Allen University and I did not feel ill at ease in anybody’s company. I went to Temple and became an outstanding student there and wherever I went I had no sense of inferiority. I felt if anything were true, I had quite an advantage over the others. I never took a back seat, was always proud of my Allen University background. Because when I was there they were careful about the instructors doing what they were supposed to for their students and they were the best. This little old bachelor’s degree has stood me in good stead wherever I went.
TC: Throughout the world?
AB: Throughout the world.
TC: And how about the teacher preparation would you say contributed to your teaching career?
AB: My mother was an elementary school principal and she was an Allen University graduate and when I was standing in (unintelligible) a lot of it I assumed that (unintelligible).
TC: Right, from the home environment?
AB: From the home environment, and her father was a university graduate. He was one of the outstanding blacks from Sumter County, an educator as well as a pastor. So I had a very fortunate background.
TC: Right, and have been well trained.
AB: Well, I hope so.

TC: I think it’s obvious. Your demeanor, your achievements through the years, you’ve been rewarded.

AB: Yes, I should have been.

TC: Yeah, because you had gotten the ingredients.

AB: That’s true but my grandfather had seven children, all of whom were sent to college and all of them graduated except one whose health failed.

TC: I see. May we go back to something?

AB: Yes.

TC: You knew the person for whom Sims High School was named and you also told me earlier that you had a brother to work in the printing shop at Sims High School.

AB: Yes, his name was B. F. Hildebrand.

TC: B. F. Hildebrand?

AB: Yes.

TC: I see. And I think would you agree that having a printing shop back in those days, the school was founded, excuse me, and it was opened in 1927 and I have seen a school newspaper in which there was a picture of that printing shop. The school newspaper was dated 1928, so the point is that that printing shop was existing in 1928 and I would think that that’s quite an achievement for a black high school at that time.

AB: Quite, quite, quite an achievement. I’ve often wondered how that came to be.

TC: It seems that he was a very smart man and very interested in quality training of the students.

AB: Oh yes.

TC: And I understand that he was a strong disciplinarian.

AB: Yes.

TC: And he also, we talked about culture earlier. Sims High I said earlier I think was a Rosenwald school. It is now Sims Jr. High School. When integration came they didn’t dare get rid of that name Sims High so it is now Sims Jr. High.

AB: I see.

TC: So Prof Sims, we called him Prof Sims, I knew him for one year. When I was in the ninth grade he was still alive and I think he died maybe like seven or eight years later. Reading in the Union newspaper, I saw in there where he had brought the Fisk Jubilee Singers to Union. And the auditorium at Sims High at that time, it seated five hundred persons and he had invited white persons to attend. You said Caucasian earlier, same thing. And the article, what the article said in the invitation, that half of the seats, that is two hundred and fifty, had been reserved for white persons and the others, of course, for blacks. And he had something else in which he invited the public and again half of the
seats had been reserved for whites, the other half for blacks. So my point here is that he was very political I think and he knew how to communicate with blacks as well as whites to get things done.

**AB:** I understand that he was and did. He was quite a person. My oldest brother entered professional life under Mr. Sims. Mr. Sims and my parents were contemporaries in school. I don’t know whether he attended Benedict.

**TC:** Sims? He did.

**AB:** But my mother and father knew him very well.

**TC:** He attended Benedict. Chappell attended Allen.

**AB:** Yes.

**TC:** So he seemed to have been a very astute person.

**AB:** Yes.

**TC:** One of the things in terms of the opening of Sims High, he couldn’t find enough persons in Union, Union County, teachers that is, with a four year degree, so he went out and got persons that had a four-year degree.

**AB:** Yes. His school was rated among the best high schools for blacks in the state. Will you excuse me a moment?

**TC:** Actually we’ll finish at this point. I certainly thank you for your time and the most informative information. So again, I appreciate your interest and your time.

**AB:** Well, it was a joy. At my stage chronologically I owe it to you younger people to transmit whatever I have that will be of value to you. So I thank you for asking.

**TC:** Well, thanks again. I’m sure that persons, I didn’t tell you earlier that this tape here will be in the archives of the University of South Carolina in what’s called the Caroliniana section.

**AB:** Yes, I know that. My family’s history is there. My grandfather was an outstanding (unintelligible) of the administration.

**TC:** I see. That’s interesting to know and good to know. Well again, I certainly appreciate your time and your interest. Thanks again.

**AB:** You are more than welcome. I thank you. This was a good opportunity for me to relive some things.

**TC:** Yeah, and you really have relived a lot.

**AB:** Thank you. I’ve lived a long time.

**TC:** Thank you.

**AB:** I’m ninety years old.
TC: Right, ninety years old.

AB: Ninety.

TC: So as they say, a lot of water has gone under the bridge. And maybe over.

AB: Right.

TC: Thanks again.

AB: Oh, you’re welcome.

End of interview