Scope and Background Note
In this oral history interview, John Stevenson discusses his educational experiences as a student, teacher, and administrator in South Carolina, moving often in his childhood and attended a number of different schools as his father was an A.M.E. minister, teacher influences, the classes they taught, and their Northern education, attending Allen University and decision to become an elementary teacher, serving in the Korean War, receiving his Master's degree from Boston University, teaching career, integration, teacher and curriculum development decisions, being the first black Superintendent of a Richland County, South Carolina school district in the 1980s and 1990s. John R. Stevenson was born in 1931. In the 1980s, he became the first Black superintendent of a school district in Richland County, South Carolina. Tom Crosby interviewed John R. Stevenson at his residence in Columbia, South Carolina, on April 11, 2007. Interview covers Stevenson's education at Robert Smalls Elementary (grades 1-2 in Beaufort, S.C.), Alston High (grades 2-6 in Summerville, S.C.), Robertville Junior High (grades 6-7 in Robertville, S.C.), Alston High (grades 7-11), and Tomlinson High (grades 11-12) Schools from the late 1930s to the late 1940s. It also covers his education at Allen University from the late 1940s to the early 1950s.
Tom Crosby: Today is April 11, 2007. I’m at the home of Dr. John. R. Stevenson. Dr. Stevenson, what does the R stand for?

John R. Stevenson: Robert.

TC: John Robert Stevenson. Dr. Stevenson was the first black—African-American—superintendent of district—?

JS: Richland School District One.

TC: Richland School District One in Columbia, South Carolina. Where were you born?

JS: I was born in Columbia.

TC: You were born in Columbia?

JS: Yes, but I was not raised here.

TC: You were raised where?

JS: Well, my father was an AME minister so we moved a lot. My mother’s home was Columbia and when my brother and I were born, she came back to Columbia to see her doctor here. But at that time my father was preaching somewhere in the Sumter County area. After we were born she took us back to where he was and we stayed there until we moved.

TC: What county did you attend elementary school?

JS: Well, I started in Beaufort: Robert Smalls School, Beaufort, South Carolina.

TC: Did it go from first through—?

JS: It went from first grade through eleventh grade.

TC: First through eleventh?

JS: Yes.

TC: I see. And it was called?

JS: Robert Smalls School.

TC: Do you know whether that school was a Rosenwald School or not?

JS: No, I don’t. I have no idea and I only went there from first grade and half of the second grade, I guess from September to December, and we moved to Summerville, South Carolina.
TC: And what grade did you start in Summerville?

JS: I started the second part of the second grade and stayed there until I was in sixth grade, and in December of that year we moved from there to Garnett, South Carolina—which was in Hampton County—and attended school in Jasper County at Roberts ville Jr. High School. I spent the remainder of the sixth grade there and then seventh grade. And because the schools were not considered very good, my parents sent my brother and me back to Summerville to go to school, and we stayed there until December of my junior year. We moved from there to Salters, South Carolina, and the name of the school there was Tomlinson High School in Kingstree. We took a bus every day to Kingstree, to Tomlinson. After spending the remainder of the eleventh grade—from January until school closed, I guess, in June—they moved my father again, to Charleston, and I chose not to go to school in Charleston. My parents let me stay in Kingstree and I finished high school in Kingstree.

TC: And that was Tomlinson?

JS: Tomlinson High School.

TC: That’s in Williamsburg?

JS: Williamsburg County.

TC: How would you describe in general your elementary teachers in terms of their interacting with students and their dedication and whatever. Any comments you would like to make?

JS: Well, in elementary school starting in Beaufort, I recall—and I can’t think of her name now—an excellent teacher, one that I liked very much. And in second grade I had a good teacher too. I only spent half a year with her and then we moved to Summerville. All in all I think that the teachers I had in Summerville at Alston High School—it might have been called Alston Graded or whatever—I thought the teachers in Summerville were very good.

My second grade teacher was very good and my third grade teacher is probably the teacher that of all the teachers I had, the one that I considered who had the biggest influence on me, Mrs. Emmaline Mance. And it wasn’t so much the academic work that she gave, even though that too was good, but I can recall that she worked a lot on character development. I can recall that every morning, when we got to school, Mrs. Mance would have written on the board some little saying, and the one that I remember most was a saying, “Manners can take you to places where money can’t.”

It was somewhat puzzling to me at the third grade level as to how could she make a statement like that, that money couldn’t take the place that manners could, but I puzzled over it a long time until finally it came to me that money isn’t everything, and if you have good manners, people will generally accept you and will be willing to be present in your company. But you can have all the money in the world and they may put up with you, but if you don’t have good manners they probably still won’t like you. They may use you because of what you have.

TC: I remember something similar to that, and I think I was in the fifth or sixth grade.
The lady was Mrs. Kathleen Eison. Someone had drawn something for her and it was a house with birds flying over it, with the statement, “Any job that is an honest job is an honorable job.” And I’ve never forgotten that.

JS: I guess after Mrs. Mance, my fifth grade teacher was probably—at the elementary level—the toughest teacher I had. She was tough in the sense that she didn’t put up with any foolishness but she taught and she made us do good work. Her name was Mrs. Roach. I believe originally she was from Beaufort but she taught in Summerville when I was there and later married a gentleman from Summerville by the name of Wickman Reed.

She was an excellent teacher and I recall that even though all of us felt that she was mean and filled us with grief, at the end of the school year, I recall that she gave me a book that she had purchased. King Arthur for Boys was the title of the book and she inscribed in there, “To the most studious boy in fifth grade.” But she was good. And then I suppose that probably the next most important teacher in my life—and I don’t know whether I would differentiate between this teacher and Mrs. Roach—but a different kind of teacher, and that was Miss Simpkins. Her father was the Episcopal priest in town.

TC: Is this elementary or high school?

JS: This is in high school—eighth grade, I think; eighth or ninth. But she taught English literature. She taught English literature and I got more from her teaching English literature—I got more history from her English literature class than I did from my history classes, because she certainly had to teach the two together, English literature and history out of which it evolved. She was an excellent teacher. Ada Simpkins was her name, Ada.

TC: What do you call that, interdisciplinary?

JS: Yes, but it was one subject but she was teaching the history behind the literature. An excellent teacher, again one who would get up and she could just give all the dates and how it related to what we were learning and all that sort of thing. This was in the early ’40s.

TC: Early ’40s. That interdisciplinary came in vogue in the past what fifteen years or something like that?

JS: But it was all linked together when she taught.

TC: Now the schools, the elementary schools, were how many rooms? Do you recall how many rooms?

JS: I don’t recall how many rooms, but in Summerville I would imagine it must have been at least twelve, at least twelve, including the library, a separate library.

TC: That’s high school?

JS: This was elementary through high school. The one in—.

TC: How about the first and second grade?

JS: That was in Beaufort. Beaufort was probably as large, or larger, than Summerville, probably a larger school, number of rooms and that sort of thing. But as a first grader and half of second grade, I got to know very little outside of the rooms right around where we were. We didn’t get into the section of the building where the high school students were. Just
the first and second graders more or less interacted with one another. But in Summerville, all of it was on one campus in two buildings. There were two buildings, but the building that we were in when I started second grade, there were probably about four rooms in that building. But across from that building was another building and that’s where I ended up when I got into fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. It was a two-story building and that’s where it housed, I guess, from about fourth all the way through eleventh.

TC: So you never attended a one-room school or two-room school?
JS: No, never.
TC: I see. After high school, you finished eleventh grade or twelfth grade?
JS: Finished eleventh grade. I finished the year they made the transition. They announced it in one year and said that those who wanted to go through—they announced it, I guess, in tenth grade, that you could graduate either at the eleventh grade, if you wanted to, or you could stay and attend the twelfth grade.
TC: So you finished eleventh grade?
JS: Eleventh grade.
TC: At what high school?
JS: Tomlinson in Kingstree, South Carolina.
TC: And after that you came to Allen?
JS: Allen University.
TC: And your major was elementary?
JS: Well, my major was elementary education.
TC: [Brief interruption.] Okay, you were in the process—I was asking you about your major at Allen.
JS: When I went to Allen I had all intention of majoring in history. But by about that time I was becoming somewhat disillusioned with history and what I had learned in high school and what I was finding out as I got into college.
TC: What was the disillusionment?
JS: The disillusionment that came about was, what you learned in high school was kind of unreal, didn’t get down to the facts.
TC: Just dates?
JS: Remembering the dates, and somewhat kind of fictionalized, to tell you the truth: you know, the usual stuff about George Washington cutting down the cherry tree and never telling a lie and all that kind of nonsense. But so that sort of—even though I still liked history and still took history courses, probably almost enough to major in it, but one day I was sitting on the campus and Mrs. Thornton—Juanita Thornton—was coming by and she saw me and said to me, “Young man, I have a course I want you to take. I want you to sign up for this course.” You know, Mrs. Thornton, when she said something, you did it.
So I said okay and I signed up to take the course in children’s literature and enjoyed it. And so she began talking to me and said, “Have you ever thought about teaching elementary school?”—because they had very few men in the elementary schools and following the lead to principalship and all that sort of thing. So I said, “Okay, I’ll think about that.” So I just sort of gave it some thought and I took some more elementary ed until I changed my major to elementary education.

TC: Did you have a minor, or in essence had a minor, I assume?

JS: History probably would have been a minor.

TC: Now would you like to make any additional comments about the education, preparation that you had at Allen in terms of preparing you for a career in education?

JS: Well, I felt that the teachers I had at Allen were well trained. Because of the conditions during that time of segregation, all of the teachers I had had gotten master’s degrees outside of the South. They had to go places that they could get a master’s in their areas. So I can recall some of them went to New York University, Indiana, Columbia University, some at Boston University.

And as a matter of fact, that later had some influence on where I entered grad school, even though not the same area. The Crumlin twins taught at Allen. They were ministers and they taught religion at Allen, but both of them had gotten their master’s in sacred theology from Boston University. And when I went in the Army my chaplain of the battalion I was in also had gone to Boston University.

All those people, I felt, were very, very well educated, so when I decided to go get my master’s I went to Boston University. So I think I had a reasonably well trained background and a lot of it being I think, as I said, the fact that they had to make it some place other than in the South.

TC: And they were diligent.

JS: They were very diligent. They taught a lot of things, things that we had to attend, the cultural side. You had to go to vespers where there were speakers who were well educated. You had to attend certain functions. I recall I heard Marian Anderson down at the Township Auditorium as a part of one of the programs that Allen and Benedict had sponsored together, and you had to go. Now a few people escaped it by just not showing up, but you know, those kinds of programs and things of that nature you had to attend.

There were speakers who were brought in from other parts of the country and so we learned from those persons, too. It might have been some teachers from Allen, or teachers who were born and raised in other parts of the South and they came there to teach. So that background helped a lot I think in exposing us to things when you might not have been exposed to as early if it had not been for that fact.

TC: In my readings, I saw where Mary McLeod Bethune came to Allen. That was 1939. And Langston Hughes also came and some other persons.

JS: And I can recall that Allen had an outstanding teacher—and I did not take his course, but I sat in on a couple of his courses—Dr. Charles Leander Hill was a professor at Allen University in philosophy and religion. He later became president of Wilberforce University in Ohio, but when he was at Allen he had to teach his courses in the
auditorium because the classes were so large, not of registered students, but of students who just came to sit in on his classes.

TC: What was his name again?

JS: Charles Leander Hill taught philosophy and religion and I went to the philosophy classes. He was a graduate of Wittenberg, and he also got his doctorate from Wittenberg. He spoke six different languages, was the pastor of Bethel A.M.E. Church while he was teaching at Allen; very erudite man. The reason I think I wanted to sit in on his class was that he was the commencement speaker at my high school graduation.

TC: What about some of the education teachers if you recall some of them?

JS: Yes, well, the education teachers I had, Mrs. Thornton, then Reverend Witherspoon.

TC: J.W.?

JS: J.W. And then there was—.

TC: Was Dr. Swinton there?

JS: Yes, she taught me also, even though at that time she was what you would call an adjunct professor now because she was working as a school principal in the Columbia school system and in my senior year she was the acting principal of Waverly Elementary School—and also taught. As a matter of fact, she was who assigned me to do my student teaching at Waverly, where she was. There was also a Mr. Moran, Robert Moran, who was in mathematics. He left and went, I believe, to Southern University.

TC: Did he also teach psychology?

JS: He did; psychology.

TC: I had him, I think, my freshman year.

JS: Yes. His wife Esther Quarles Moran, I took a course with her.

TC: How about [unclear]?

JS: No, I did not have—he came after I left Allen. In fact, he may have come the year after I left.

TC: Now after graduating from Allen, what was next for you?

JS: Well, after I left Allen—that was during the Korean War—I was drafted; went in the Army, spent four years. I was drafted and therefore I went in and took basic training at Fort Gordon, Georgia. It was Camp Gordon at that time. I finished there. While I was there, I noticed that the commanding officer sent for a couple of fellows. There were only about three or four blacks in the unit. But I noticed that he was calling out some of the white guys to come and talk to him, so when they came back we asked, “Were you in trouble?” And they said that he wanted to encourage them to go to leadership school and then to officer’s training school. So I went over to him and asked him, “What about me?” And so I signed up and went through the interview and all of the paperwork. After basic training I went to Cryptography school and then after that I went to leadership school and after leadership school I went to officers’ training school, then overseas—well, first to the Pentagon, and then overseas.
TC: Did you teach in the public schools?
JS: Not until I got out of the Army.
TC: Then you taught?
JS: First I went to Boston University and got my master’s, and then I came back and I started teaching here in Columbia at Waverley School. Taught there from 1955 till 1960 and one day my principal brought two gentlemen by who were taking a look at the school, and brought them to my classroom and they said something about my attending Columbia University.

I had told my principal earlier of my intention to get my doctorate, so he brought them by my classroom that day and he told them that I would be interested to apply, which I later did. I applied for and received a fellowship called the Teacher’s College Fellowship and I went for a year: started in 1961, stayed one year and completed my thesis.

TC: Area of study? What was your thesis about, elementary or administration?
JS: Well, it was in administration, and my dissertation was on evaluation of elementary school teachers.

TC: And then after that you went into administration?
JS: Well, not right away. When I came back I was assigned to Lyon Street School, as Head Teacher. So that’s where I went as a teacher, at Lyon Street School, and pretty much, I ran the administrative duties of the school.

TC: So that was the beginning of your administration?
JS: That was the beginning, yes.

TC: And eventually you left?
JS: Eventually. I left Lyon Street School after one year and became principal of Crane Creek Elementary and Ridgewood Elementary, two schools. I spent a couple of years there and then I was assigned to Sarah Nance Elementary and at that time Farrow Road Elementary School, which is now Burton Elementary School. So I spent one year at Sarah Nance and Burton, then I went back to school to finish up my doctoral course work and did all of my chapters of my dissertation and I came back to Columbia.

TC: So you became superintendent, the first black superintendent of Richland County District 1?
JS: Yes.

TC: How long were you in that position?
JS: Superintendent?
TC: Yes.
JS: Eight years.

TC: During those eight years, was that the time of integration?
JS: Integration took place before. I became superintendent in about 19—I think it was ’86. We actually [unclear] which was at that time called the colored school, consolidated. It started in the ’60s, actually, but it was voluntary for anybody who wanted to transfer.

TC: So the beginning integration, it was voluntary transfer?

JS: That’s how it started, sometime during the 1960s. Then in 1970 or ’71, somewhere during that timeframe, then the federal government stepped in to force desegregation, and the Office of Civil Rights wrote a letter to the district saying that we had to develop a desegregation program where all schools were desegregated to the ratio of students [unclear] racial background.

At that time, seventy percent of the students in the school district were white and thirty percent black and all the schools were supposed to be reconfigured to come up with that ratio. Didn’t quite make it and we had a couple of exceptions but then they came in—Office of Civil Rights—sent their people in and they came in and we had to explain to them why we weren’t meeting that ratio in some schools. Some of the students, because of location and some other factors—I think there were only three or four schools that remained all black. Carver Elementary School was one; Lyon Street; and there were about four others that did not meet the ratio.

[NOTE: The interview becomes difficult to understand at about this point in the recording due to technical problems. The interview has been heavily edited by the interviewer, Tom Crosby.]

TC: I imagine that integration was very difficult.

JS: Well, one of the things that happened during this time was that the district was going through a period of continuous attack about financial things in the district concerning inequitable funding among schools, and I’d been through all of that. After leaving the principalship I became the coordinator of Title I. There was a need to work on staffing all the schools appropriately. The other was to work on staff development for teachers.

TC: Staff development—what kinds of activities were initiated or mandated?

JS: We started using quite a number of consultants outside the state, outside the South, people with new ideas, different ideas, along the lines of helping teachers to understand the students. We also started doing a better job, a different kind of job, of recruiting.

One of the things that we did, we used to get more teacher applicants than our neighboring districts, but they were mostly home grown from right around in the state. A few coming from outside: soldiers at Fort Jackson, their wives coming in as teachers so they’d get jobs. So what we did was to start expanding our recruiting base. They went to colleges in and outside our geographic region.

TC: You mean most of them were from South Carolina?

JS: That’s where they used to concentrate our recruiting efforts.

TC: That’s what I’m saying.

JS: Yes, but when we started out, we started by going up the eastern seaboard as far as New York, then we moved on to Massachusetts, then we had to move on to the Midwest.
And in fact, we went so far as going to Texas as far as recruiting. So we tried to recruit from a broader area than we had been recruiting before, even though we had more than enough applicants right here.

TC: So were they looking at things like degrees?

JS: Oh, yes. In fact, we concentrated on areas of study and higher degrees.

TC: So degrees may have been one of the major ones?

JS: One of the major ones, particularly at the elementary level. Now as time passed and towards the end we even began recruiting teachers from abroad. We hired particularly in the area of science and math. We hired a lot of teachers, quite a few.

TC: Any foreign languages?

JS: We did, yes, eventually we got around to hiring some in foreign languages.

TC: How about working with the students of low achievement to meet their needs?

JS: It was a part of it. Another thing that we found in many instances, we had students, at that time particularly low achievers, if they were not doing well in school, they generally ended up in trouble in school. And a number of these youngsters lived in the low-income housing projects. So we worked with the Director of Housing for the city of Columbia and worked on a system whereby they would provide space for the district to provide instruction for suspended students. And frankly I must say, in all honesty, that idea first came from the Director of Housing. He said, “We have space and you have kids and you are suspending these kids. What we’d like to do is offer you space if you’ll furnish the teachers so that if they get suspended from school, they have to attend.” And he said he could put the pressure on the parents to make them attend.

So we would send him the names of students who were suspended from school that were from out of his area. He provided the space and we’d go out and teach them and he would let the parents know, “If they do not attend, I’m going to put you out of these houses.” I doubt that he had the legal authority to do that but the parents took it seriously so they made sure the kids went to school. I suppose that program is still operating but I’m not sure.

TC: So you think that was very effective?

JS: I think it was very effective as a short term solution but you had to get them back into school. And then we had to do some things, such as reducing class size, providing teacher aides for certain grade levels—particularly in the primary grades. They initially started with the first grade—putting an aide in the classroom, then moved up grade levels and placing an aide in the classroom for certain teachers who could use the assistance.

Then we started in the second grade. About this time or just prior to this time I became curriculum instruction coordinator in Title I. We started putting lots of teacher’s aides in the classroom. Another thing that we did was to start an after school program for students who were not achieving. Those young students would start school at the end of regular classes every day. When they would get out of their classes at the end of the day, they had a break, a snack, and then they’d start and they’d spend about an hour and a half after school with prepared lessons with consultants and the teachers developing them. And they did this Monday through Thursday. On Friday the teachers or the consultants worked on lesson plans, or whatever they had to do,
developing lesson plans for the next week. And we provided the music teachers and physical education teachers to provide those two activities also.

**TC:** And much of that is gone, I suspect.

**JS:** No, I think what has happened—.

**TC:** The music is probably gone.

**JS:** No, not Richland One. Richland One has a strong music program. When I became superintendent that was one of the things I began working on. We used to have a fairly good music program but it was kind of hit and miss. But after that we began to build a music program and again it involved things like bringing in people like Jester Harriston, who would come in and work with our choral group. Jester Harriston was a black musician but he also appeared on television on some series, but he trained a lot of choruses, went around the country doing that.

One of the other kinds of people that we brought in was one of the Marsalis brothers, Wynton Marsalis’ brother, Branford. He came and worked with our band in a series of workshops, so those kinds of things we developed. But the music program is strong, as is physical education. We did not drop, as a lot of other school districts did during this time, music and physical ed. In fact, ours became stronger. And nurses was another thing in school.

**TC:** Do you think that the music program contributed substantially to keeping kids in school?

**JS:** In some instances, yes. Some of our music teachers were very good. All of them were supposed to be, but some did it—and I mean they did a good job, of working with teachers in developing whatever the teacher was going to teach. The music, art, and P.E. teachers would meet with the teachers to determine what is it that you’re going to teach, so that I can see what skills you’re developing. And when I see what skills you’re developing, I will use my discipline, whatever it was, to enforce it or to reinforce what you taught.

Some teachers did an excellent job. There were some outstanding examples of this in our schools. Others probably didn’t know enough about it to know how to do it or didn’t do a very good job of it; they just skimmed the surface. But that was one way you had of reinforcing academics through those areas.

**TC:** Innovative and creative.

**JS:** Yes.

**TC:** That’s good. At this time do you have any additional comments you would like to make with reference to your career or contributions that teacher education contributed? You alluded to some of that earlier but I wondered if you had any concluding remarks that you’d like to make.

**JS:** Well, the only thing, I think—I believe that the higher education that I got came from two different perspectives, Allen University and Boston University, which was different from Allen University. And Columbia University was also quite different from Allen. I’ve known a lot of people, and especially in education, I felt that it was important to get as broad a spectrum to deal with as I could. I could have gone to Boston and stayed there and gotten my doctorate and my master’s, but I wanted a different experience, different mindset or different philosophy.

Columbia University, for example, Teacher’s College, which is where John Dewey taught, a lot of that philosophy was still there. A lot of people would deny that that philosophy is still
relevant, but it has a lot of bearing, and so that’s one of the reasons I went to Columbia. I think it helps to broaden your background to better and more clearly see what you have to work on.

TC: And getting different perspectives. Okay, well, if you don’t have any additional comments, I really appreciate your time.

JS: You’re welcome.

TC: Well, thanks again.

End of interview