

Perry Letsinger

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Interviewer: Paula Bruno
Transcribers: Janena Benjamin, 2004 and Laura Cabbage-Draper, October 2019
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Abstract: Perry Lee Letsinger (1903-1993), the son of Peter Letsinger and Florence Letsinger, was born and raised in Scotland Neck, North Carolina where he worked with his father as a farmer. Mr. Letsinger married Annie Mae Baker in 1923 and they had a total of five children: Annie (died in infancy), Peter (died in infancy), Perry, Esther, and Mildred. Mr. Letsinger came to Perth Amboy in 1929 and was employed at Camp Raritan (later Raritan Arsenal) for approximately thirty years as a laborer, foreman, and surveillance inspector. He also worked as a salesman for Watkins Products and as a custodian at Campbell School in Metuchen.

In 1930, the Letsinger family settled in Metuchen and lived at 663 Middlesex Avenue for several years before purchasing their own home at 1 Sampson Street in 1939. Mr. Letsinger was an active member of the Second Baptist Church in Metuchen serving as a deacon, the Sunday school superintendent, and an advisor to the Missionary Society. He was president of the Metuchen-Edison Branch of the NAACP, a member of the Board of Directors of the Metuchen YMCA, and a member of the Grand Lodge. Mr. Letsinger also served on the Civil Rights Commission and the Borough Advisory Commission during the 1960s and 1970s. He is buried at Franklin Memorial Park in North Brunswick.

In this interview, Mr. Letsinger discusses his close-knit family life, his work at Camp Raritan, and his impressions of Metuchen and its treatment of the black community (both past and present). He also talks extensively about his involvement with the Second Baptist Church, his work as president of the Metuchen-Edison Branch of the NAACP, and his participation with Freemasonry.

Interview note: There are several parts of the interview where Mr. Letsinger words are unintelligible. Those sections have been marked as unclear in brackets.

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P. Bruno: Today is December 8, 1977 and I'm interviewing Mr. Perry Letsinger of Metuchen, New Jersey. [recording paused]

Okay, we're ready to start. Let's start with a little bit about your ancestors, about your parents, what they did, where you were from. You told me you were from the South, right?

P. Letsinger: Yes. I was from a little town—about 4,000 approximately—from Scotland Neck, North Carolina. And my father [Peter Letsinger] and I, we worked together after the schooling. And so in 1929, I anticipated a change in my life. So I came to Perth Amboy. Am I going too far?

P. Bruno: Just to go back a minute, what did you work with your father in?

P. Letsinger: We worked as farmers. Farmers. I worked with him and we shared the profits.

P. Bruno: So you lived on a farm?

P. Letsinger: Yes, um-hm.

P. Bruno: And why did you choose to move to Perth Amboy?

P. Letsinger: Well, it was kind of inconvenient. Matter of fact, farming was kind of indirect life. You might make profit and you might not. Sometimes [unclear] was against us and sometimes you had farm failures. So the last year before I left, I cleared a few dollars. So I told dad that I'm going to quit this job and go to Perth Amboy to a friend of mine, who lived in Perth Amboy; in fact, he's passed now. But that's what I did.

P. Bruno: Okay. So when did you first come to Perth Amboy?

P. Letsinger: In February 19[29].

P. Bruno: And what did you do?

P. Letsinger: The first thing I did, I went down to the—after a couple of days—I went down to the press and see were there any jobs available. So I went down there on a Monday morning and I met a Polish fellow. And he said to me, “There was a job I saw in the paper, helping in a store.” So I went down to be the first one to get there, and met a Polish fellow and he came out this door and said that, “You want to work?” “Oh yes, I want to work.” “There's a place called Camp Raritan [Raritan Arsenal]. I would have gotten a job there [unclear]. I would have gotten a job there, but I had my leg broken and I couldn't qualify physically.”

P. Bruno: How did you break your leg?

P. Letsinger: He did, this Polish fellow.

P. Bruno: You broke your leg?!

P. Letsinger: No, he broke his leg.

P. Bruno: Oh, he broke his leg.

P. Letsinger: So when he went to the physical examination, he couldn't pass the test. So it was suggested to me that I would go down [to] Camp Raritan. So I did. The following morning, I got the job.

P. Bruno: Great. And so what did you do at Camp Raritan?

- P. Letsinger:** I worked in the Ammunition Department and I was a laborer for ten years. And then from 1939 up to 1950, I worked as a foreman. In 1955—from [19]50 to [19]55—I worked as a surveillance inspector. And then I retired after thirty years of service I gave the government.
- P. Bruno: That's a long time. So when you worked at Camp Raritan, were you still living in Perth Amboy or have you moved to Metuchen?
- P. Letsinger:** No, we lived in Perth Amboy [in] 1929, and then we—one year—then we left and came to Metuchen in 1930.
- P. Bruno: You came to Metuchen in 1930?
- P. Letsinger:** Yes.
- P. Bruno: Okay. What was the town like? What can you remember about Metuchen in 1930?
- P. Letsinger:** Metuchen then was fair. Metuchen was owned, I understood, by a few people personally. They owned acres and acres, and they were reluctant to sell any of it. So it was just a small town, the same size as now; it hasn't grown, that is, in square miles. Yeah, but it has grown people-wise. People have moved in to town. About the people died, who owned the property—after they died, then their ancestors decided they would sell them.
- P. Bruno: Can you remember any of the names of the people who owned?
- P. Letsinger:** I can't. Let's see, it seems to me there was the Applegates—one of them—and the other name doesn't register now. But it was only about a few people in town who owned practically the whole town.
- P. Bruno: And so where did you finally find a place to live in Metuchen?
- P. Letsinger:** I moved on Middlesex Avenue (663) and I stayed there for eight years. And then after eight years, then I moved to number 1 Sampson Street in Metuchen where I bought the home. And I've been there ever since.
- P. Bruno: Yeah, I remember that being your address. What were some of your first impressions of the town?
- P. Letsinger:** Well, it was fair, but it wasn't—no participation with blacks.
- P. Bruno: Were you one of the first black families to move into town?
- P. Letsinger:** No. When I came here, it was—I know there was the Milligans, the Cobbs, the Johnsons, and Scruggs, and Butlers. Those were the five black families that I knew. May have been many more, but those are the ones I can identify.
- P. Bruno: Yeah. Even today, Metuchen doesn't have a very large black population.
- P. Letsinger:** Well yes, it's quite a few now because the place has been built up. Now, you take on John Street, that's a very progressive street now. People there are making

\$30,000, \$40,000, \$50,000 a year; and on Finch Street, same thing. And other areas on the lower part of Durham Avenue, they are built up, which takes in part of Durham Avenue—a part of Edison and part of Metuchen.

P. Bruno: How did the town's people back in the thirties accept black people?

P. Letsinger: Fair. As a matter of fact, we mixed well then, very well. They went to school, I guess. Our schooling was normal, and I still couldn't see any [unclear] discrimination at all in the school system. So people got along very well for what I could ascertain. We didn't have any complaints from folks in the school system.

P. Bruno: And did you feel you were ever discriminated against in this town because you were a black man?

P. Letsinger: No, not necessarily. There are isolated cases only, isolated cases only. And you would have that anyway because people regardless of how society developed or how well they get along, you always can find a few isolated cases where people come from this way don't mix as well as others. You had that then, I think you probably have it now.

P. Bruno: That's true. So did you choose Metuchen because you knew of these other families?

P. Letsinger: No. I chose Metuchen because Metuchen was near Camp Raritan, where the place I worked. [loud background noise] It was only about a mile and a half traveling one way back and forth, see. And it was called Camp Raritan and one of the—since Metuchen didn't have—I mean Edison didn't have any post office or schools or anything of that kind—everything was registered under Camp Raritan, Metuchen, New Jersey.

P. Bruno: I see. What about your schooling, your education?

P. Letsinger: Well, I was limited as far as [unclear]. My parents were poor, so I didn't complete high school. I went as far as eighth and part of the ninth grade [unclear].

P. Bruno: And how did you come to be a deacon in the church?

P. Letsinger: Well, I joined the church early after I got here—Second Baptist Church (100 Durham Avenue) under the leadership of the late Reverend Nelson D. Tate; he's passed on now. And I worked for a few months, and they asked me for a little participation in the church. So I served as a superintendent of the Sunday school for approximately twenty-five years. In the meantime, they asked me, "Would I serve as a deacon?" The people made the choice. They asked me, "Would I serve?" So I consented and we were what you call a "walking deacon" for six months, and later I was ordained.

P. Bruno: Okay. Now can you tell us a little bit about what a deacon is and what a "walking deacon" is?

P. Letsinger: Yes. A "walking deacon" is a person who's been picked from the church. He doesn't have the authority of a deacon. In other words, he's on a trial test, he's on a trial.

P. Bruno: Yeah. And what were your duties? What did you do?

P. Letsinger: Then, just to walk upright and be a person without any—what do you call?—a person with moral standards, and exemplify my life as a Christian from one end of the week to the other. And people watching while you—seeing whether or not you are going to qualify to serve as a deacon or not. In case I had a falling, morally or any otherwise, I would have been taken off. But I satisfied the people—six months—and then they called from the council and ordained me as a deacon to that church.

P. Bruno: It must have been quite an honor then, to be a deacon.

P. Letsinger: Yes, it was. Yeah, that's right.

P. Bruno: So after you were ordained as a deacon, what were your functions in the church?

P. Letsinger: Well, we ordained for the purpose of taking care of the widows, looking out for the widows and orphans, and serve tables financially and also the Communion table. People who were sick—we not only serve table at the church, but people of our parishioners who were sick in the hospital and in home and shut-in and couldn't get out—we'd take the Communion to them.

P. Bruno: And these were the jobs of the deacons?

P. Letsinger: Yeah, yes.

P. Bruno: How many deacons did the church have, please?

P. Letsinger: Then? Around, only three. Only three, um-hm.

P. Bruno: You told me when you were here last time that you've given some talks in the church.

P. Letsinger: Yes, I've given many talks.

P. Bruno: Okay, I'd like to know about some of them.

P. Letsinger: I talked when I first came, early part, organized a Fellowship and Unity Club, and I wanted the full participation of the church environment. So I talked on that and the necessity of having a—because apparently it looked like the people weren't close together in fellowship at the church house. So I named a fellow and got a few old people together and we organized and we functioned about eight years.

P. Bruno: What were your goals?

P. Letsinger: Our goal was to bring—for that purpose—was to bring people together, closer, to create possibly more love for each other, and have a stronger fellowship in the community. That was that fellowship [unclear].

P. Bruno: And how did you do that?

- P. Letsinger:** So we organized and we met bi-weekly and later monthly. And we actually got together, we had social events and things of that sort. So I think we broke down some barriers that was lying between the people. And I think we had success certainly to the extent that we were closer together.
- P. Bruno: What kind of social functions? Dances?
- P. Letsinger:** Yes, we had dances, and then we had dinners and different things of that sort.
- P. Bruno: And what else have you given talks on?
- P. Letsinger:** On the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. I was the president of the NAACP for, in fact, eight years in Metuchen. So I talked on the purpose of organizing both black and white. The NAACP [Metuchen-Edison] Chapter, it was already organized, but when I assumed the duties, I had to follow up with the person who preceded me. My brother [Gilbert Letsinger] had been the first one to organize the NAACP.
- P. Bruno: In Metuchen?
- P. Letsinger:** In Metuchen, yeah. So that was in the thirties.
- P. Bruno: In the thirties. Now at that time, how many members were in the NAACP in Metuchen?
- P. Letsinger:** Then, approximately between forty and fifty.
- P. Bruno: Forty and fifty. And were these both black and white people?
- P. Letsinger:** Yes, integrated, um-hm. Black and white.
- P. Bruno: And you served on the NAACP for how many years?
- P. Letsinger:** Eight years.
- P. Bruno: Eight years. Can you tell us a little bit about what you accomplished in that time? And you told me that you were active in the sixties also. So why don't you just go into a little bit about what you did.
- P. Letsinger:** Well, we went from town to town and we selected membership—membership for the NAACP, the National Organization for the Advancement of Colored People. And we tried to cooperate with the purpose of a national organization on the national level, as near as we could. So we had public speakers come in to talk to us sometime. I remember we had Mr. Roy Wilkins, he was the [national] secretary of the NAACP following Mr. Walter [Francis] White. That was in the thirties. He came to speak to us on the national level. And we had people of all levels come in and talk from time to time. So we—
- P. Bruno: What did they give their talks on?
- P. Letsinger:** They talked on equal opportunities, what we [unclear] prevalent today—equal opportunity, fight against prejudices because of the color of skin of a man,

because of his race and national origin. And we talked on that then, and that's the same goal that they're trying to do now. "But yet, when, when?" We said like this.

Digressing a little bit, I was at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. We had a tour, a white tour. And we went all the way through the building, and we found one room was incomplete. And we asked—I think I asked the guidance person—which was why this room was left incomplete. He said, "When all the nations get together, when all the nations are there, we will complete this."

P. Bruno: And this was in the thirties?

P. Letsinger: Yeah, this was in the thirties. So what I said—in fact, I said this, "I hope to live a time that we won't need a NAACP, National Organization for Advancement. I hope to live to see the day. Until then, it'll be very imperative that we fight for justice when justice is left out because of the complexion of a skin or religions or national origin. Until that happens, we further will [be] continuing to do the National Organization Advancement of Colored People."

P. Bruno: So what did you do? In the thirties and in the forties and when you were active, what did you do to try to like bring the people together and try to create more equality in this community?

P. Letsinger: Well, we would meet from time to time, as I said before, on a local level. And then in time, we'd have—

P. Bruno: Did you get much support from the people in Metuchen?

P. Letsinger: Yeah, well probably good, probably good, probably good. I think in that day, those were the early days and people were not as alert then as they are now because we had fellows then, but not to such an extent that brings us to meet with the news, you know. The only thing you could get it through the papers, and half the people didn't read the papers. So we had to—we'd get literature from the national office constantly, bring us up to date what is happening throughout the country, like they have mob lynching, Klu Klux Klan, and stuff like that, and where it's been [unclear]. And now we have the same thing now and it's the 1975 down in Jamesburg [unclear].

P. Bruno: Have you seen any changes within the NAACP over all the years that you've been associated with it?

P. Letsinger: Change of their programs?

P. Bruno: Yeah.

P. Letsinger: No, their programs haven't changed. They will still maintain the same status as the organization, but the public have to change.

P. Bruno: Have you seen changes in the public attitude? Anything towards the black man?

- P. Letsinger:** Well, I've seen changes. I said this, in the sixties or in the late fifties rather, we didn't have, as I said before, no black participation in Metuchen. So we had a march, a peaceful march around the Borough Hall.
- P. Bruno: This was in the late fifties?
- P. Letsinger:** Yeah, or the early sixties. Yeah. And we got black policemen in Metuchen, we got two of the finest policemen that happened to be black. Two of them—one was thirty-two—which is not what we anticipate, whether there was a step forward in the right direction, but we didn't have then. We also had a teller in the bank. We accomplished that with the NAACP under my leadership—teller in the bank and people worked in the stores. All that participation came after the social—at a march around the Borough Hall.
- P. Bruno: So you have seen changes in this community regarding the acceptance of black people?
- P. Letsinger:** Yes, yes, I've seen changes there. Matter of fact, I witnessed change there, um-hm.
- P. Bruno: That's great. Okay, what about your other organizations? You mentioned that you joined the masonic lodge?
- P. Letsinger:** Yes, I joined the masonic lodge [Hiram Lodge 3 of Plainfield and Metuchen] in the late forties.
- P. Bruno: Tell me something about that. What is a masonic lodge? I don't really know.
- P. Letsinger:** A masonic lodge is a secret organization.
- P. Bruno: It's a secret? Oh, so you can't tell me.
- P. Letsinger:** Secret organization, but I can't tell you details. But it consists of morality, principles, and what have, and it's an organization that binds you together in one unit. And its purpose is to set a man to morality and make him fit to make a contribution to not only the local community, but to the world. And I joined that organization and I was able to reach the very top from the early part of the organization to the last step, which is the Thirty-Third and Last Degree in Masonry.
- P. Bruno: In Masonry?
- P. Letsinger:** In Masonry. Thirty-Third and Last Degree in Masonry.
- P. Bruno: What is Masonry?
- P. Letsinger:** Masonry is a masonic lodge, it's a masonic organization. I don't know if I should give you the interpretation on the masonic level because it is a secret organization.
- P. Bruno: Okay. Well, I don't want you to tell me any secrets. But is it religious in any way? I'm not familiar with it.

- P. Letsinger:** **Yes, the masonic organization, we get every degree that we have out of the Holy Bible. Every degree from the First Degree to the Last and Thirty-Third Degree is organized under the Holy Bible. So it is a religious organization.**
- P. Bruno: I can remember just from listening to other tapes that the masonic lodge, where it is today, used to hold a lot of social functions in the past.
- P. Letsinger:** **Yeah, we do too. We have our annual and semi-annual sessions.**
- P. Bruno: Now, is this just a men's organization?
- P. Letsinger:** **Well, when you say Masonry, it is a man, men. But when you say [Order of the] Eastern Star, that's a branch of Masonry that consists of women.**
- P. Bruno: Is your wife an Eastern Star?
- P. Letsinger:** **Yes, she is. Um-hm, um-hm. And of course we have men now, worked as a patron for the Eastern Star for New Jersey and New York. There's a lot of running there. And there are female masonic organizations. They are the female masonic organization.**
- P. Bruno: The Eastern Star?
- P. Letsinger:** **Eastern Star, yeah. Because it goes on from one level to the other too.**
- P. Bruno: And they have different levels and their organization is based on the Bible?
- P. Letsinger:** **Yes, yes. Right, yeah, in the Bible also. Each one has their banner, their charters, and et cetera.**
- P. Bruno: Okay. How about any other organizations?
- P. Letsinger:** **Civil rights organization. Yeah, I worked in the [Metuchen] Civil Rights Commission also, [with] Mr. Austin Banks; he was the president of the Civil Rights Commission. I worked with him and others, with many folks who are now serving out their own civil rights commissions.**
- P. Bruno: And what did you accomplish when you were on the Civil Rights Commission?
- P. Letsinger:** **It's coordinated the same thing that the NAACP did; it was fighting for the same principles exactly. The only thing, the Civil Rights Commission was on the local level and the NAACP is on a national level, but they functioned on a local level in Metuchen. So our goal was practically the same.**
- P. Bruno: And what did you do on the local level? What was a meeting like when you attended the meetings? Like what sort of things were discussed?
- P. Letsinger:** **Well, it was discussed whether or not we had tension, whether a person was denied equal rights, whether there was tension, or there was someone trying to invade another person's responsibilities or another person's character, or try doing things to keep a person from living in this area or living in that area—but**

trying to break up discrimination. We did run into cases where that the houses—a black person was denied the opportunity to live in over here in this area because of his skin—

P. Bruno: In Metuchen?

P. Letsinger: In Metuchen, yeah. But a lot of those barriers have been broken down, a lot of them. But as I said, there are a few isolated cases yet. And then sometimes we were segregated in the lunchrooms. I remember my brother and I, we went to eat lunch. At that time, the mayor was [Arthur K.] Hillpot, he was there and he ran—they didn't want to serve us because of our complexion of our skin. We had a little confusion there so he put us out and we knew the mayor so well—Hillpot. We called him up, so he intervened, came right down there, supported our ideas, and nothing happened. But that was the attitude at that time.

P. Bruno: Now when was this?

P. Letsinger: This was in the forties.

P. Bruno: And this was a restaurant in Metuchen?

P. Letsinger: Yes, right out of Metuchen, between Metuchen and Edison. It was near US [Route] 1 Highway now, that way. I think it was between there—between the [boundary] lines. I think you could say it then, it was on the Edison line, but wasn't exactly Metuchen. This incident wasn't.

P. Bruno: Can you remember any other incidents that you were directly involved in that you were on?

P. Letsinger: In Metuchen?

P. Bruno: Yeah.

P. Letsinger: Discriminatory? No, I don't remember any personal discrimination that happened.

P. Bruno: How about any that your friends ran into?

P. Letsinger: I was so busy at that time. I only lived in Metuchen. I was gone almost 50 percent of my time—out of state in New York, New Jersey, somewhere in New Jersey—so I couldn't keep up with the trivial things. But there weren't any severe cases I know of, that I can ascertain at this moment.

P. Bruno: Okay. Just to get to another area. Besides like all these organizations, you were a very active man, I can see. Who were some of your friends?

P. Letsinger: We had many. Let's see, the Wernik family.

P. Bruno: Wernik?

P. Letsinger: Wernik family was our good friend. I knew his grandfather, Abraham Wernik, yes. His father—

- P. Bruno: And you're speaking about the [Donald J.] Wernik, who is the mayor of Metuchen now?
- P. Letsinger: Yes, yeah. They've become our good friend on the white side. Then we had the Tates—most of them are dead now. And then you had the Johnsons and the Butlers and Cobbs and Milligans—all of them were friends. We had a lot of [them in] my life in Metuchen.**
- P. Bruno: And are these families still in Metuchen?
- P. Letsinger: Some of them. Since I said, the Tates are mostly all died out with the exception of one of the Tates that I associate with. He [Morton Clifford Tate] was pastor of Pentecostal [Missionary Assembly] Church [at 6 Weston Street] in Metuchen. But the other Tates—one of the Tates live in Poughkeepsie [New York]—not Poughkeepsie, but that town right near Poughkeepsie. What's the name of it? In there, the horse racing. What's the name of that—**
- P. Bruno: Freehold?
- P. Letsinger: No, no, it's up in North Jersey.**
- P. Bruno: North Jersey.
- P. Letsinger: Yeah. The town doesn't register as well as I knew it.**
- P. Bruno: I think I know what you mean, but I can't think of it either. How about a little bit about your wife and children?
- P. Letsinger: My wife—we were married [in 1923]. We had our fiftieth anniversary in 1973.**
- P. Bruno: Oh, congratulations!
- P. Letsinger: [background noises] Fiftieth. It was sponsored by our three children: Perry A. [Letsinger], Esther Marie [(Letsinger) Chambers] and Mildred [Amandolyne (Letsinger) Hooper]. [recording paused]**
- P. Bruno: Okay.
- P. Letsinger: So I had three children: Perry A. and Esther Marie and Mildred Amandolyne. They got together, said they were going to give us a fiftieth wedding anniversary, so they did. We were married fifty years on August twenty-ninth. So in September, they got about 130 people together and they gave us one of the most elaborate anniversaries that I've witnessed.**
- P. Bruno: Oh wow. Where was it held at?
- P. Letsinger: It was held at the Presbyterian Social Center [at the First Presbyterian Church].**
- P. Bruno: Oh, that must have been great.
- P. Letsinger: Yes. We had—it was a mixture; we had black and white joined us there.**

P. Bruno: All of your friends.

P. Letsinger: Yes, a lot of friends. We had—not all really—only about 135 people. But the friends that we had built up through the years in New York and New Jersey, well there wouldn't have been a building in Metuchen to hold them. So they just got the few of our close friends and our immediate family.

P. Bruno: Oh, that's great.

P. Letsinger: You want to know about the names—

P. Bruno: Yeah, of your children?

P. Letsinger: My son [Perry A. Letsinger], he graduated from Rutgers [University] in 1949 and then he went in the services right when the Korean War broke out. So Uncle Sam drafted him then, so he went in there [as] a technician of water. He went in with the medical group because he was taking up a pre-med course in Rutgers. So then after he came back, he said—because at that time money wasn't coming in too plentiful—so he was quite considering the job. He said that, "I think I'll go into the embalming school" instead of following up as a medical student. We wanted to make him a doctor being the only son, but he had compassion on us, we were getting older and figured that wouldn't train us too much, so he went on his own and got in an embalming school in New York City. So he finished that in two years—he went to New York because two years in embalming school, twelve months a year, you could finish it. Had he taken an embalming school in New Jersey, it took four years or nine months a year. So he started out in New Jersey, and he stayed in that for about two years and the money didn't come as he thought it should, so he went in and he got an application with the City of New York. He applied for a job because he was a senior scientist; he was a scientist then. So he worked himself up. Now in short, he's a senior scientist. He works in radiation in New York City and he's the head of his department.

P. Bruno: Oh, that's great. And what about your daughters?

P. Letsinger: My daughter? My oldest daughter Esther Chambers—she's Esther Chambers now—she's secretary at Raritan Arsenal for a number of years, and then she got a job, an advanced job at International Starch Company in Dunellen. So she was the first black person to go in on that in secretary work in that area. So she has been there about fourteen years. And Mildred, my other daughter, she was secretary clerk also with the government at Camp Kilmer for a while. Then she left that and she went to Rutgers; she still is in Rutgers University. And they, both of our daughters, they deal with the payroll department—vouchers. And she's in Rutgers now and my oldest daughter is still in International Starch. And they are successful. They took an extensive secretary work in order to qualify for the exposition. So they are doing well. For three children, they all are three jewels. We never had a moment trouble with them in the school system or in the public.

P. Bruno: You seem to have a really strong family unit.

- P. Letsinger:** Yeah, we have a tie—a close tie together. My son, he's living in Jamaica [Queens], Long Island. And I could call if we got in trouble today, and as he busy as he is, he would come over. We have that bond, family tie.
- P. Bruno: It's something that not many families have. And I wonder if you can talk a little bit about it and how you were able to achieve it with your family.
- P. Letsinger:** Yeah well, we believed in the old system, set in the old way. The family that prays together, stays together. So we had—around the table—we had prayer, asked God's blessings upon us, and we built up in the Sunday school, early part when our children were small, I didn't send them to school, I took them to school. My wife was home with [unclear] meals, I went around in the community, I picked up other children, families to Sunday school. And that's why they raised me so high, as a person need to be in charge of people, so they made me superintendent of the Sunday school. So that created a strong tie in my family unit, and I think prayer did it because we believe in prayer. Prayer changes things. And I think that God rewarded us according to our work—not then, but now. By the way, I might inject this, I believe in the Scripture where David said, in the old picture of the Old Testament, he said that he'd never seen the righteous forsaken, or the seed begging bread, they haven't been longer than one day. So this was what he was talking about, not only us, but our family, our offspring, they're all doing the [unclear] work. [lots of background noise and banging] And course we are thankful to God for it and whom I love [unclear] kind of thing because He's the one that able to control our soul and body. But then my mind growing old, but I still teach adult class.
- P. Bruno: But besides prayer, I would think that your wife and yourself had a good relationship that you were able to share with your children. And you seem to be a very understanding man and probably your children are too.
- P. Letsinger:** Yes. Thank you. Yes. Yeah, they are.
- P. Bruno: So your values in life—
- P. Letsinger:** Yes. You see, from the very beginning our families were close. When we married, you hear so much about mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law. We were able to avoid that. My mother [Florence Letsinger] and my wife's mother [Sophia Baker] had close ties; they were real close friends. And as far as her mother was concerned, for a mother-in-law, she was just so close to me. She acted as if she was my own mother and vice versa. My mother had the same relationship to my wife. So we grew out of that atmosphere. We had a tendency to kind of, wherever you go, east, west, north, or south, we still hold on to that. So I still love it. It's followed us this far, so I don't think we should change now. That's one change for the better.
- P. Bruno: Okay, I just want to ask you a little bit about Metuchen today and just a little bit about your feelings about life. You seem to me to be a very content man. If you can you go into that a little bit.
- P. Letsinger:** Well, I get my contentment, I believe, now because I have—my activities have subsided because of my age, I can't participate as well as I did then, but now—when I came to Metuchen, they had the YCMA [Young Men's Christian

Association] then, we have it now. In the 1930s, black men I don't believe were privileged to join in the YMCA, but now I'm working on the Board of Directors at the YMCA. That's how much change it was.

P. Bruno: You also were instrumental in a lot of that change, and that has probably given you great satisfaction.

P. Letsinger: Yes. Because of my religious background, I guess when they asked me to—they were having the meetings without prayer, see, and I believe that anything that you attempt to do pertinent to the [unclear] society that we living in, in order to build up a true and honest posture, I think we should ask God to invoke His blessing upon us. So they made me a chaplain now. [laughs] I wanted them to pray before my meeting because I think we do that to God because God able to save both soul and body. Because if it hadn't been for Him, I wouldn't have been able to gotten up this morning, see. I'm constantly [unclear] and I recognize that. I like to let people know whom I'm contacting with just how I stand for the principles of Christianity. But I said before that I walked the streets of Metuchen for forty-seven years, back and forth, and I can walk on both sides of the street and look people straight out in the eye because I have nothing to hide. And not that I haven't been an angel all the time, don't need to get that impression, but I've tried to walk near a certain spectrum if I could, before God and man. So course I'm not helping the strength, but I'm able to get around, still do a little good.

P. Bruno: That's great.

P. Letsinger: Yes. See I would like for my last days to be my best days. As I said to the minister last night in our prayer service—I was at a funeral yesterday in Trenton—the minister said that that deacon had lost soul, he had creased his own shoes on the living. Well that's my philosophy, that a person creases his own shoes while he's living because it makes it easier for the person who's going to leave God because he would just take his own walks and get the sermon from that. But if a person is saying one thing and acting another, he's not only a hypocrite to himself but he's a hypocrite to people and overall to God. And we have to be paid according to our works, see, because I believe that our works were our Father. Okay?

P. Bruno: Well, they're fine principles to live by.

P. Letsinger: Yeah, I try to do our best. Not defending the fact that there won't be obstacles. They'll be obstacles. Matter of fact, the closer to God man try to live, there will be more obstacles in the way. Remember Job? Remember the servant Job in the Bible? Job?

P. Bruno: No. [laughter]

P. Letsinger: No. Job was an old patriarch, but he was a test case, and God tested him, [unclear] Satan, which is the devil, tested him. And Job came out victorious. He tested him to such an extent, he had sores on his head, to the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, all over him. The theme was—the Devil was—he wanted Job to denounce God and he wouldn't do it. So by holding out and being such a man as he was, God brought him back and he had many—he had ten children, he had seven sons and three daughters, and all of his family was destroyed, and all of his

cattle. He was the richest man in the East because God restored to him more than he had before because he held to the faith.

P. Bruno: Okay. Well I don't really have any more questions I want to ask you. Do you have anything else that you want to add? I think we've covered everything on my question list.

P. Letsinger: Yeah, let's see. Well, all of our three children, yeah, our three children—well children, our grandchildren. Is that what you have?

P. Bruno: Oh dear, I don't know. We have a little bit more time, and maybe we could just use it—because we are trying to keep this to Metuchen. Maybe if you can have any more recollections of Metuchen as a town, we can talk about that.

P. Letsinger: Well, Metuchen has grown because of the new people coming into town and purchasing homes. And it's still considered a residential town. It was then when I came in, and it still is.

P. Bruno: What do you think of the growth? Do you think it's a good thing?

P. Letsinger: Yeah, I welcome it. I welcome it. Yes, I welcome it because we brought in black and whites, and we get along fairly well together. Course where there is an organization where two or three people, the older ones disagree. But there's nothing bad to disagree. Normally we don't become disagreeable. Disagreeing is good. It's healthy to disagree, not to become disagreeable. Okay?

So we have, I guess, an expansion of a program that we had when we came to Metuchen because more people involved. So we have the churches, we have the YMCA, we have about same amount of churches. I think there were Episcopal, Presbyterian, Catholic, Lutheran, and the two Baptist—about seven churches when I came, and the same amount as is now.

P. Bruno: What's the size of your congregation at the [Second] Baptist Church?

P. Letsinger: Now, it's around 175.

P. Bruno: And when you came to Metuchen?

P. Letsinger: Roughly around twenty-five.

P. Bruno: Twenty-five? Wow!

P. Letsinger: Well, you see, what brought this about is more people have moved in to town, see. When I came to Metuchen, I don't think—oh, about six or seven black families. Now we got many more. So with a larger group, a larger association there. Because you see, just like you have—well, we had approximately twenty-five and now we got 175, and all the churches have expanded also the same way. But I welcome this, I think this is progress. And where there's progress, I welcome progress.

P. Bruno: Well that's great. I think that we'll end it now and thank you very much.

P. Letsinger: **Thank you.**

P. Bruno: I think this was a good tape. I'll stop this

P. Letsinger: **So sweet. You might have to cut some of it.**

[END OF INTERVIEW]