**REUNION SPEECH**

**FOR**

**DEBORAH HORTON-JORDAN**

Hello everyone! Welcome to the “First Annual” reunion of the relatives of Pond Beat and Mullins Flat!!! It took **ALMOST THREE** **GENERATIONS** to bring us back together... to our land... our heritage... our family and our community... but here we are!!! Imagine all of our relatives.... our grandparents and great grandparents... our great aunts and great uncles... and their friends and their neighbors... all gathered together... looking down upon us... smiling... and wondering if we got their **BEST** recipes and stories right!!! (**Wait for the laugh**). This reunion is so much more than anything we might touch or taste today. This reunion is about honoring our families, their accomplishments, their struggles, and the incredible strength and will that they made sure we inherited and share. I am so proud to learn even more about our legacy and I can’t wait to be with all of you, look into your eyes, discover and recognize our connections, and testify and honor all that brings us together.

While I must admit I was a little hesitant about this event when it was first suggested to me, there’s **NO** denying that the energy and spirit present is beyond special. I also must say that if it weren’t for the “encouragement”.... the “enthusiasm”.... **AW**.... who am I kidding.... **THE INSISTENCE** of our cousin, James Jackson... better known as **WOOTSIE**... and his refusal to accept the word, “**NO**” from me... **not ONE**.... **not TWO**.... maybe **TWO HUNDRED** times.... (**Wait for the laugh**), we might not be here.... but he insisted, and he brought on incredible support in the form of Deborah Black, an able, fabulous, enthusiastic co-conspirator, and I was **TOAST**. Many of you have traveled from far and wide to meet as close to our “home turf” as possible, and each journey counted brings a little more perspective, a unique viewpoint, and a new story to share. Deborah has traveled from Atlanta and has done **A LOT** of advance work to make sure all of our activities and reminiscences are well coordinated... And I have to say, now that the reunion is upon us, I am so glad we’re here. **WOOTSIE** wanted us to get together because, welllll, for the obvious reason.... he **LOVES** his family, he’s proud of his legacy, and he’s even **MORE** proud to learn even **MORE** details through the eyes of historians, neighbors, and friends. What’s of even **GREATER** importance is that the legacy and legend of Pond Beat and Mullins Flat lives on within us and the next generation so that in the future, to paraphrase a Broadway show tune.... for “one brief shining moment” that was known as.... **OUR HOME**... lives on.

It’s incredible to see so many of you here today. A famous poet once wrote, “I am part of all that I have met.” After the festivities of this weekend, after the excitement dies down.... after we all get a chance to return to our “current lives,” each of us will have a chance to reflect on the overwhelming experience being here this weekend created, and there are so many lessons to carry with us.... the importance of acknowledging the struggles of those that came before us.... the value of seeing how “we all turned out,” some seventy years later, and the blessing of learning the strength and power of the family.... and with the gift of connection, the deep sense of self that comes with discovering one’s history and most importantly, **FAMILY**.

I will admit, again, that it might have taken me a little while.... okay.... a couple of **YEARS**.... but **WOOTSIE** was an immovable object. **HE** possessed the vision and respected the **IMPORTANCE** of having this reunion. There’s so much people take for granted in life... the young think they’re going to live forever.... those in the middle are too busy climbing their own personal hills to seem to care.... but the seniors among us.... AHHHH... they’ve gotten the gift of wisdom. They’ve seen how fleeting time can be.... they **KNOW** how to cherish and respect the past while advising the younger ones how to brace and prepare for the future..... so Wootsie..., **THANK YOU**. Thank you for pushing me... and **US** to gather as we are.... thank you for being wise for me and for not giving up on this idea.... Look around you, Wootsie, you’ve made a permanent and positive impact and difference on every single person gathered here in Huntsville this weekend. **WOW**. (**Do you want to ask for applause here?**)

As I was preparing my thoughts for this welcome speech, so much came to mind that I want to share with you, and while we have a historian, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ present to relate the story of our relatives of Pond Beat and Mullins Flat, I would like to share what this reunion means to me. Henry Louis Gates said, “If you share a common ancestor with somebody, you’re related to them.... it doesn’t mean you’re going to invite them to the family reunion (**You can say**).... **I guess Henry didn’t consider US**.... (**and wait for the laugh**), but it means you share DNA. I think that’s fascinating.” Back in the day, we didn’t really know from DNA, but intuitive human connection is probably even stronger than biology. I came across a picture as I was doing some research online. It was of a gravestone for a woman named Melvinia Shields. Does that name sound familiar? On the bottom of the gravestone, chiseled in big, bold, strong letters is the name **MICHELLE OBAMA**. Of course I was curious to learn Melvinia’s story. I read the fine print on the gravestone. It said, “She was born a slave in South Carolina in 1844. At age 6 she was brought to the nearby Shields farm in what is now Rex, Clayton County, Georgia. Her family would endure a five-generation journey that began in oppression and would lead her descendant to become THE FIRST LADY OF THE UNITED STATES. ... Theirs is a story of HOPE.” And that is what this reunion means to me.... what are we, if not for our foundations.... if not for the struggles of those that preceded us.... fought for us before they even knew we might exist? **THAT’s** why we’re here... to learn our very special history..... to honor those that walked before us... and to lay the path for our young ones and those that will follow in our footsteps... even though they may not yet be born.

Today, we are all one family. Whether we are united by similar DNA or stories, or other connections, we are **FAMILY**. And we gather to remember those of us that are no longer here, but guide us with their spirit and their stories, those who lost their homes and their livelihoods and in many cases their families, as they were scattered because of the development of the Redstone arsenal. But today we’re back..... We’re together... and we have shown ourselves (**If you want you can say**) ... **AND WOOTSIE**... (**and wait for the laugh**)... that family ties are stronger and more magnetic than struggle... family ties stretch further than displacement ... family ties stand up to the test of time.

Although they are no longer with us in body, my parents, Callie Horton and James Bruce Horton, of Mullins Flat made sure my siblings and I had an abundance of love and valuable life lessons. By sharing a little bit of what they were like, they will live a little bit in each one of you... and if you can, try to think of the elders in your life... grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles.... that shared love and lessons and helped to make you just who you are today.... while my father was a cement finisher, my mother Callie, took care of us kids. There are seven of us total... that’s **A LOT** of child care!!!! Just ask (**Name your siblings that are present**) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ who are here today!! There might have been a lot of children running around, but our parents had **ZERO** tolerance for bad behavior. We were taught the importance of education.... the necessity to have **FAITH** in life, and as important, to treat **EVERYONE** with dignity and respect... **NO EXCEPTIONS**.

If any of you remember where I grew up, you might know the Horton family had a neighbor down the block. Mrs. Bumpers had her issues...she had **A LOT** of issues.... she was mean and seemed miserable and she may have enjoyed her cocktails a little too much (**I don’t know... do you want to say she was an alcoholic?**), but our mother **INSISTED** that even though most of the neighbors avoided Mrs. Bumpers, every time we encountered her, we were to be friendly, polite, and welcoming. We were to say hello and ask how she was doing. Actually, the direct order was, “I don’t care... whenever Mrs. Bumpers comes down the street, you **BETTER** be speaking to her.” One day Mrs. Bumpers saw my mother and made a point to comment, “You have the **MOST MEMORABLE CHILDREN**.” We learned from our mother’s unwavering respect for **ALL** people to be kind and considerate with everyone.... no matter what. That lesson stayed with me all these years... and now it’s yours... use it well!!

My parents were very special people. They learned their lessons from the people of Mullins Flat and although that town was eradicated, the lessons and the love live on. To me, I am thrilled to see so many of you here, but honestly, I dedicate this reunion to the young people in attendance. It is my hope and my intention that I say something that reaches your heart and leaves a permanent mark on your soul, and while I understand that it’s tough to be a kid in this world, it’s even tougher if you think you have no foundation.... if you think you have no heritage to call on.... if you think that the history and very real struggles of the people who made you don’t count. **THEY** are **YOU**. They gave you what you have today, and if you’re in the midst of wondering what **YOUR** purpose is, **PAY ATTENTION**. Your purpose is to learn the history of our community... how we were displaced.... and how... decades later, we’ve come back stronger and more determined than ever.

I want you to know that we are all **ONE**. We are in this **TOGETHER**. The tough lessons I learned from my parents are ready to be passed on to you, so get ready to catch!!

From this weekend, I want you to learn **A LOT**. Besides the importance of family and faith, I want you to know what it means to have humility. I want you to appreciate your foundation and celebrate your roots. Even though your ancestors were displaced from this land, they survived. They rebuilt.... they found their strength and they left you with a rich and colorful history.

When I think of people that have reminded me of the lessons my parents instilled in us at home, I think of basketball coach John Wooden. This was a man that literally created champions from practically **NOTHING** and no matter the victories or the recognition he achieved, he never forgot from where he came. When he was the coach at UCLA, he was famously known to go to the broom closet, grab a broom, and work with the crew to sweep the court after each game. That was how he connected to his humble roots even though he proved himself by leading his team to unprecedented championships. I hope each one of you know where **YOUR** broom closet is, how to sweep, and what it means to do that. Remember your roots. They are **HERE**.

As I said earlier, I also find incredible strength in the faith my parents instilled in us. There’s a quote I’ve heard from Denzel Washington, and I dedicate this to all of you young people here with us.... “I pray that you all put your shoes **WAY** under the bed at night so that you gotta get on your knees in the morning to find them. And while you’re down there, thank God for grace and mercy and understanding.”

With this reunion, we intend to accomplish a lot. We will learn about the area and the event that tried to break several communities but didn’t. We will reconnect with old friends.... which are **REALLY** family... and we will plan on keeping our connections and our stories stronger and more colorful than ever before. We will admit to Wootsie that **HE. WAS. RIGHT.** (**Wait for the laugh**). This reunion means so much to all of us.... and we will pass the torch of history and legacy to the young ones that are here today.

James Baldwin said, “I am what time, circumstance, history have made me, certainly, but I am much more than that. So are we all.” In order to know who we are, we have to **LEARN** who we are and from where we come in order to know where to go, how to live, and the strengths and potential that lies within us. **THIS** is **YOUR** story. Learn it.... honor it... find strength in the struggles of our relatives and know that you’re made of strong stock.... and when life’s trials attempt to find you... **REMEMBER** who you are and from where you come. Ask questions. Show respect to all you meet. Find your broom, **use it**, keep the faith, and remember to **share your lessons with others**.

Thank you all!!!