


Oral History Interview
with
Gwen Marcus Wright

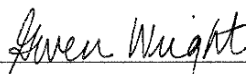
Date: Wednesday 4 July 2007
Interviewer: David S. Rotenstein, Ph.D.
Location: Montgomery County Planning Department Office
Silver Spring, Maryland

Release Form

Oral History Informed Consent Form

1. I hereby agree to participate in an interview to document my work in the Montgomery County, Maryland, Historic Preservation Office.
2. The interview will be recorded (audio). In the interview I may be identified by name, subject to my consent. I will be identified by name in any transcript (whether verbatim or edited) of such interview, subject to my consent.
3. I understand that the interview will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes and that I can withdraw from the project without prejudice at any time. In the event that I withdraw from the interview, any recording made of the interview will be either given to me or destroyed, and no transcript will be made of the interview.
4. I understand that, upon completion of the interview, the recording, transcript, and this release form will be transmitted to the Montgomery County Historic Preservation Office and to Montgomery Preservation, Inc., for archival and research purposes.
5. I understand that I am entitled to receive a copy of the recording and transcript.

Interviewer signature 
David S. Rotenstein

Interviewee signature 
Interviewee Name (printed) GWEN WRIGHT

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Consent date 7/4/07

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Introduction

Gwen Marcus Wright was hired by the Montgomery County Planning Department in 1987 as a historic preservation planner. Wright has undergraduate degrees in architecture and historic preservation from Yale University. She came to historic preservation after initially considering a career in architecture. Her intent after college was to move to Houston for a job with an architectural firm; instead, she ended up at the Historic Galveston Foundation, where she worked from 1979-1987 managing preservation easements and ensuring rehabilitation projects were sensitive to historic properties.

During her tenure in Montgomery County, Wright successfully consolidated staff working in three county agencies on historic preservation issues into a single comprehensive program that supports the Montgomery County Historic Preservation Commission by reviewing historic area work permits, conducting research to identify historic properties for designation in the Master Plan for Historic Preservation and organizing outreach to the community. Historians, archaeologists, and interpretive staff working in county-owned historic sites also joined the comprehensive program Wright built.

Under Wright, the inventory of historic properties protected by the county's historic preservation ordinance has grown by the addition of historic districts in Beallsville, Takoma Park, Chevy Chase, Kensington, and Garrett Park, as well as numerous individual historic sites. The county's *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* includes a wide array of individually designated properties distributed throughout the county and all of the periods during which the area now comprising Montgomery County has been occupied, from Native American archaeological sites to post-World War II suburbs, are represented.

In November 2005 Wright was named acting chief of the Countywide Planning Division, a job she performed while also supervising the historic preservation office. Wright was appointed in 2007 as the interim director of the Montgomery County Planning Department and she relinquished her duties in historic preservation to a new section supervisor. At the time she was appointed to the acting director position, Wright was promoted to permanent chief of Countywide Planning. In June 2007, Montgomery Preservation, Inc. awarded Wright the 2007 Montgomery Prize for excellence in historic preservation.

The interview with Wright took place the morning of Wednesday 4 July 2007 in her office at the Planning Department headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland. It lasted approximately two hours and was digitally recorded.

Interviewee: Gwen Wright

Interviewer: David S. Rotenstein

Interview Date: 4 July 2007

Interview Location: Montgomery County Planning Department office, Silver Spring, Maryland

ROTENSTEIN: This is David Rotenstein and it is Wednesday July 4, 2007, and I am conducting an oral history interview with Gwen Wright in her office at the Montgomery County Planning Department.

Hi.

WRIGHT: Hi.

ROTENSTEIN: Let's go through a few personal questions first of all. How old are you?

WRIGHT: I am forty-nine. I'll be fifty this summer.

ROTENSTEIN: And your educational background?

WRIGHT: I went to Yale University. I got a degree in architecture and a degree in architectural history. And I focused most of my architectural history studies on late nineteenth century architecture.

ROTENSTEIN: And that was undergrad?

WRIGHT: Yes.

ROTENSTEIN: Did you go to grad school?

WRIGHT: I do not have a graduate degree. Amazingly, I always imagined that I would go back to graduate school but I got into the workforce. I sort of fell into the field of historic preservation and just kept doing it and it didn't seem like I needed to go back to grad school 'cause I seemed to be lucky enough to fall into positions where I could practice the profession. And I learned a lot just through the day to day practice.

ROTENSTEIN: And what attracted you to historic preservation?

WRIGHT: Well actually I wasn't originally thinking I would work in historic preservation. I was going to be just a traditional architect and I after college went to Texas thinking that I was going to work for Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill that had just opened a new office in Houston. When I went down to sort of get settled in Houston I was also called by a man named Peter Brink, who was with the Galveston Historical Foundation and he was looking at a resume I had sent out months earlier and had a position that had just come available. And I said, "Well, I happen to be in Houston just a short distance away. I'll drive down to meet with you." And I did

and he offered me a position with the Galveston Historical Foundation which I preferred to the position in Houston with Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill because first of all Galveston's a much more pleasant place to live than Houston. And secondly it was clear to me at Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill as a very, very junior employee I would be doing not much more than maybe drawing plumbing details, if I was lucky. And in Galveston I felt like there was an opportunity to really get in on some meaty projects and do some exciting work.

In all cases I thought I was going to do it for a year or two and then go back to the east coast to do something else. I ended up staying in Galveston for eight years working for the Historical Foundation, moving up to become their essentially their director of architectural design running both their residential and commercial programs to encourage rehabilitation of structures. Administering and monitoring about twenty-five easements on really wonderful commercial buildings in the Strand National Register Historic District and administering a residential revolving fund where we actually bought houses, did some renovation work to them, and then resold them. We did a lot of educational and outreach programs. We did sort of, we ran the full gamut of different kinds of preservation-related programs from very hands-on kinds of things to educational work.

And that was a wonderful, wonderful learning experience for me. Actually a lot of the things I learned there have served me well in my work in Montgomery County. I think coming from the private nonprofit sector is a great, a great kind of route in that in the private nonprofit sector you're always very aware of where your budget is coming from because you have to raise all the money through grants or through doing events that people pay to come to. You get a very strong sense of sort of how to run an organization. You, you know, learn real sort of on the ground very practical preservation kinds of lessons and it's, you know again, it's just – it's great preparation, I think, for any kind of preservation work but certainly preservation work within a governmental context because you see things a little bit differently.

ROTENSTEIN: What year did you begin working in Galveston?

WRIGHT: Nineteen seventy-nine. And I left in 1987.

ROTENSTEIN: Okay. And Peter Brink, that's the same Peter Brink who's with the National Trust now?

WRIGHT: Yes. After I left in '87, I think it was a year to two years after that Peter accepted a job with National Trust for Historic Preservation and became a vice president for programs and preservation and programs. And we sort of joked about how we were doing this mass migration to Washington, D.C., 'cause when he first moved to Washington he lived about three blocks away from me, also [laughs]. So it was really, it was really sort of a small world.

ROTENSTEIN: And how did you end up going from Galveston to Montgomery County?

WRIGHT: Well, I was about to turn thirty. I felt like I wanted to get back to the east coast. But I wasn't very, oh I don't know, I wasn't being very proactive in terms of looking for jobs. But a friend of mine who was the city planning director in Galveston, a man named Mike Elms, said to

me just casually that he had seen in an APA publication a job that was mentioned with this group in Silver Spring and he had heard it was a good planning department and, you know, maybe I'd be interested. So he sent me a copy of the job announcement that I probably wouldn't have seen any other way because I didn't read APA publications. I don't have a planning degree, I never focused on that. And I looked at the ad and I thought, "Well, what the heck. I'll throw in my resume and, you know, see what happens."

And I did and to my utter surprise they actually called me and asked me to fly up to Washington for an interview and I thought, "Oh this is great. Even if I don't get the job, I get a free trip to Washington."

So I flew up. Stayed with a friend who lives on Capitol Hill; got completely lost on the Metro finding my way out to Silver Spring. This was in August and I ended up being forty-five minutes late for my interview. I was of course, you know, wearing a suit and stockings and high heels and I was drenched with perspiration. I was flustered because I was late. I had already pretty much decided, you know, there was no way I was getting this job.

So I sat in on the interview and just, you know, answered the questions; did the best I could and left sort of figuring, "Oh well, you know, I got to see the Smithsonian, what the heck." And to my amazement a couple of weeks after that, they actually called me and offered me the job. I was completely flabbergasted. But it was good – again, I saw it as a good opportunity to get back to the east coast. They were going to pay my moving expenses, which was a big, you know, benefit. And I said, again sort of, "You know, I'll do this for a year or two and see how, you know, see how it goes. But this is a way to get back to the east coast and have my expenses paid for."

As it turns out, that was – that year or two has now extended to almost twenty and I'm now the director of the department, or at least the acting director of the department.

ROTENSTEIN: What was the title of the position when you began?

WRIGHT: It was a historic preservation planner position. It was the only full-time position in the planning department to deal with preservation. I was replacing a woman named Marty Reinhart, who did not have a preservation degree. She had a degree in geography. I think she was sort of interested in preservation but she had been assigned – she had been a planner in the department for a while and she was the one in the department they had assigned all the preservation work.

In addition to Marty Reinhart, there was a part-time contractual staff person who's name was Susan Cianci and Susan –

ROTENSTEIN: How do you spell that last name?

WRIGHT: Last name is C-i-a-n-c-i. And Susan, I believe – although I'm not absolutely sure whether she had gotten a degree in preservation. I don't think she had. I think she had just graduated from GW in Urban studies or something but didn't have an actual degree in

preservation. She had done, you know, some graduate work with Richard Longstreth and had an interest in preservation but she didn't – Again, back in that day there weren't as many graduate programs in historic preservation as there are now. I mean certainly some of the longstanding programs like the one at Columbia were in place but they were – it was a little more rare to have graduate programs in preservation.

So Susan was a part-time contractual employee who had just recently gotten her degree but she and I sort of got along well and in fact we're still in touch and, you know, started working on a variety of preservation projects. At that time the way that the preservation program in the county was set up – it took me a while to figure this out – was that all of the staffing of the historic preservation commission, which had been established in 1979 but I think held their first meeting in 1980. All of the staffing for that commission occurred through the Department of Housing and Community Development in the county executive branch of government up in Rockville and there was one full-time employee dedicated to staffing the historic preservation commission who at that point was a woman named Bobbi Hahn, that's H-a-h-n.

And then there was this full-time position in the Department of Planning that dealt only with designation work. At that time there was a lot of very contentious designation projects that had been going through. You know, you have to remember that the program had only been in existence really for about six or seven years at that point. And so there was still a very big push to go through all these resources that had been identified on the Locational Atlas in 1976 and evaluate those resources for designation.

Right before I had arrived there had been a little flurry of designations and there had been the designation of the Kensington Historic District and the Boyds Historic District and the Hyattstown Historic District. Those all happened around 1985, 1986. Those were some of the first, you know, really big designations and when I arrived we were embroiled, we were in the middle of the Silver Spring controversies about historic designation of the Silver Theatre and Shopping Center.

So there were actually in essence three preservation offices when I arrived in '87. There was Bobbi Hahn at the Department of Housing and Community Development. There was my position in the Department of Planning. And then there was Mike Dwyer's position in the Department of Parks. Mike had been a long-time employee of the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission. He had worked both in Prince Georges County and in Montgomery County in terms of helping to do the original surveys that resulted in the creation of the Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites. He was involved at that point in, you know, very, very sort of baseline work trying to ensure didn't tear down, you know, all the historic sites that were on park land. There was not really much interest at that point in the Department of Parks in doing any kinds of interpretation or frankly in even owning these historic properties. And so Mike was just doing sort of day to day damage control to make sure that buildings weren't being torn down accidentally [laughs] or, you know, mistreated in various ways.

So that was sort of the preservation program in the county when I arrived in '87.

ROTENSTEIN: And how did everything become consolidated into a single office or location?

WRIGHT: Well that sort of happened over time and actually, just briefly, the historic preservation commission function and the Department of Planning staff were combined in 1991 and then in 1995 Mike Dwyer and his office were also combined into the one office. But, the things that led up to that 1991 consolidation are sort of interesting.

Again, when I arrived in 1987, Bobbi Hahn had been a staff person for about – at that point – maybe five years. When the program, when the historic preservation ordinance was passed in 1979 and the commission started meeting in 1980, the county executive assigned a staff person named Craig Gerhart, who was a person on the executive's staff, a young man, to be the staff for the historic preservation commission.

Interestingly, just as a side note, he and Marty Reinhart, my predecessor, eventually got married and he moved – they moved together to Prince William County where he became the essentially chief administrative officer, ultimately, for the county and may still be that to this day. So, again, a little interesting piece of trivia.

But Craig was the staff for a year or two, very, very early on in the life of the commission. Then Bobbi Hahn was hired. Bobbi had been involved in helping with the creation of the first historic district in the county, which was Capitol View. And that was created in 1982. She lived in Capitol View Park and was active in the Capitol View Park Historical Society. She didn't really have any training in preservation *per se*; she had, you know, an undergraduate degree in history but she sort of came through the ranks as more of a citizen activist. So she came to work for the historic preservation commission within the office of the Department of Housing and Community Development and she was a very good, committed, dynamic kind of leader for those early days. But, you know, again having come from the citizen activist background, it was perhaps, I don't know, less diplomatic than your typical government bureaucrat. And ran into a lot of conflicts with the director of the Department of Housing and Community Development, who was a man named Rick Ferrara – and how his last name is spelled, I'm not sure [laughs], something like F-e-r-r-a-r-a or something like that.

In any case, as the Silver Spring issues heated up, the conflict between Bobbi Hahn and Rick Ferrara became even more pronounced. The county executive at that time was a man named Sid Kramer and Rick Ferrara worked directly for Sid Kramer. And he was to some degree a political operative-type and Sid Kramer was the county executive who really wanted to see Silver Spring redeveloped as a mall, essentially an interior mall like White Flint or Montgomery Mall. And what that involved – there were some proposals on the table – what that involved was, you know, would have been total demolition of the Silver Theatre and Shopping Center and of all the other buildings sort of in that block.

And the historic preservation commission took a pretty proactive stance on this issue. They, even though the Locational Atlas was a little fuzzy about its identification of historic resources in Silver Spring, they along with the Art Deco Society of Washington, Richard Striner being in the lead pushed to have the area right at the intersection of Georgia and Colesville identified as the Silver Spring Historic District. Although if you look on the Locational Atlas, the area that had

been identified on the Atlas is actually a bit farther south along Georgia Avenue, some of the small stores that are along Thayer and Bonifant and so forth.

So they did research, they pushed that forward. Marty Reinhart, who was the staff person who evaluated designation proposals for the planning board, was involved in looking at this analysis. They got the planning board to essentially designate a Locational Atlas historic district that was right at the intersection of Georgia and Colesville.

As this sort of moved forward, Bobbi Hahn became under greater and greater pressure because, you know, the work of the commission, the historic preservation commission, was a direct, directly at odds with the county executive's desire. And there was a lot of pressure on her to change her staff recommendations and to try to sort of toe the county executive's line. This is sort of what I entered – this is the point where I came to work in Silver Spring and in fact at one of my first planning board meetings, I remember that Max Keeney, who was on the planning board at that time, when he first met me his first words to me were: "Well Hello. I hope you don't like Art Deco!" [laughs]. And you know, so there was, you know, on the planning board as well a lot of antipathy about the whole concept of preserving the Silver Theatre and Shopping Center.

ROTENSTEIN: How about in terms of historic preservation in general? What was the attitude?

WRIGHT: Well I think actually on the planning board, there was a fair amount of support. We had a really, I think, good planning board at that point. The chairman was a man named Norman Christeller and Max Keeney was on. Jack Hewitt was on. I can't remember the other folks. Betty Ann Krahnke had been on and just had gone off right before I came to work for the commission.

I think there was general interest in it, although they were really, again, still very focused on preservation of nineteenth century resources. And – but what I saw with the board members at that point on many issues was this sort of – which I thought was very positive – I think the sense of, you know, we have to look at sort of what's – they were very, very big on looking at what is the greater public good? I heard them talk a lot about sort of, you know, public interest and the public benefit and public good and in fact on Silver Spring one of the things that they did that made a lot of people angry was they said, you know, "We're not going to move forward on a lot of these designations just in a vacuum. We want to see what might be proposed for redevelopment on a site and understand that in relation to the historic preservation goals and weigh that." Try to be able to weigh, you know, where is the greater public benefit.

I think that made a lot of preservationists angry because they felt like, you know, you should just look at preservation not look at, you know, anything else. Put on your blinders, look at the criteria in the ordinance, and that's that.

But the board at that point, the planning board at that point, was into this sort of balancing, weighing thing. But I believe they were sincere about it. That they really wanted to try to understand what would be sort of in the greatest public interest.

I though it was a really good time at park and planning. It was a good board. Dick Tustian was the planning director. I don't think he was all that interested in preservation *per se*, but he was a very dynamic director. So the first five years or so, four or five years that I worked at park and planning, there was a lot of controversy about designations, really mainly surround Silver Spring. My sort of strategy coming in was to number one, not focus all of my time and energy on Silver Spring but to focus on the resources that had been identified in the Locational Atlas. There was a lot of, aside from Silver Spring, a lot of hue and cry about how we needed to review resources that had been identified on the Atlas. One of the things that was happening, we had a couple of very large historic areas, like Takoma Park, for example, that were on the Atlas but had never – had not yet been evaluated. And the historic preservation commission had worked out a sort of funky process that wasn't really in line with what was written in the law, that basically said on these Atlas districts they would review exterior alterations in these Atlas districts almost as if they had already been designated under the moratorium provision on substantial alteration. And they used local historic preservation groups to sort of do the first line review and then it would come to the HPC.

It was a process at that point had no grounding or foundation in the actual law, in 24A. It had been sort of created to be sort of expedient. Folks in the communities hadn't really been informed or educated about it. There were some very – the historic preservation commission meetings were very, there were some very contentious meetings and they went till very, very late at night. They were held up at the Executive Office Building in Rockville, usually in a conference room, sometimes in the cafeteria, but never with, you know, never in a formal hearing room. The minutes were kept on a little, you know, old-fashioned cassette tape recorder and the commissioners and the applicants really got into it on occasions with applications, you know, swearing at the commissioners and storming out of the room and it was a little – it was a little chaotic.

I think they were doing the best they could, but it was, you know, it wasn't being handled in a way that sort of made you feel this great sense of professionalism. And there were all these folks who would be coming in from Takoma Park very confused, you know, sort of saying: "Well, the Takoma Park – Historic Takoma told me I could do this and they thought it was fine." And then the historic preservation commission would say: "But we don't think it's fine." And then they had to explain to them how this wasn't actually a historic district yet. That if you didn't do what the historic preservation said, that your property would be kicked to the front of the pack for evaluation. But even when they did that there was no – because again, the historic preservation commission office and the planning office were separate. There was no promise that the nomination, once sent to the planning department, would actually move forward.

I mean it was a very chaotic kind of situation process wise. So I arrived; Bobbi Hahn was in the throes of all the problems on Silver Spring. She stayed – probably a year, year and a half, maybe till '88 or '89 when she finally got into a real knock-down drag-out with Rick Ferrara, again over Silver Spring and she ended up resigning over it. They put a young man, they hired a young man to take her place who's name was Jared Cooper. And Jared had a degree in preservation from, I forget what it's called, Middle – it's in Tennessee.

ROTENSTEIN: Middle Tennessee State?

WRIGHT: Middle Tennessee State, yeah. And he was a pretty sharp guy, actually. You know, he was pretty good and he started trying to, you know, give some structure to it all. We worked closely together. He stayed for a couple of years and then he left and they put a young woman who worked in the Department of Housing and Community Development, but had no preservation background, in charge of staffing the historic preservation commission. A woman named Laura McGrath. And she and a young woman who was actually an administrative aide, Allison Vatter [?] were the two, you know, young women – both in their twenties – who were the staff to the historic preservation commission.

And I think that in the meantime I had been sort of pushing ahead on designation. I mean that was sort of my, my job. And we had gotten some resolution in Silver Spring, at least to the point of saying, you know, these properties are on the Atlas. We had had actually a demolition permit filed on the Silver Theatre and Shopping Center and my job, along with I still remember Jeff Zyontz who was in community based planning and John Carter, who was in urban design, we met with the attorney who had – for the owner – who had filed these demolition permits and sort of bullied him into withdrawing those permits. Basically told him that that certainly would kick in the moratorium provision of Chapter 24A, we would recommend in favor of designation, his properties would be designated, and then his client would really be up a creek and –

ROTENSTEIN: Wasn't that the, what is it, Markus Brothers, Markum?

WRIGHT: At that point the Burkas owned it, yeah. And so I still laugh when I've seen the buildings fixed up and used and made sort of a centerpiece of the Silver Spring revitalization. I think I still have copies of the demolition permit applications that had been filed and that we, again, just sort of through – I don't know what – through intimidation [laughs] I guess convinced the owner and his attorney to withdraw.

But I had been moving forward on designations other than Silver Spring. We had initiated a big study of Takoma Park that started in 1989 and finished in 1992. And it was a big effort to comprehensively survey and evaluate the Takoma Park district, which really hadn't been done. The community had done some survey work but it hadn't been done systematically.

I was able to bring on some additional contractual part-time employees. Susan Cianci had left at this point; she went to work for the City of Hagerstown. We hired a woman named Mary Ann Roland and another woman named Carol Kennedy and brought on Clare Cavicchi, who is now Clare Kelly, as a contractual employee and we started doing the survey of Takoma Park. We entered into a big sort of community task force discussion. We introduced sort of for the first time this idea that within a historic district you would categorize properties as outstanding, contributing, and non-contributing and that there would be levels of review associated with each of those categories and that we would put those review guidelines in the actual designation.

None of that had happened up to that point and Takoma Park was really where we fleshed out all of those ideas. So – and we had a whole series of properties in the western part of the county. Individual sites but they were really in many cases very nice nineteenth- and late eighteenth and nineteenth century buildings that we brought forward for designation. We began to work more

with the county council members to get them, you know, to better understand historic resources. When we were doing – this is all in the sort of late eighties, early nineties time frame. When we were doing the properties in the western part of the county we had the Beallsville Historic District, which is a wonderful little crossroads historic district. And we knew it was going to be a hard sell because all the property owners within that historic district, it was very small, every single one of them were vehemently opposed to the idea of historic designation.

So we were able to get a bus tour arranged with some members of the county council, particularly folks who are on the – what's called the PHED committee which is P-H-E-D; it stands for Planning, Housing, and Economic Development. It was that subcommittee of the full council that reviewed historic designations that came forward. And we had Bill Hanna and Rose Crenca and a couple of other council members and we took them out on a bus and we drove them all around and showed them these wonderful historic properties in the western part of the county. And we took them to Beallsville and we had a lunch stop there. We went to a little country inn that existed at the time called Staubs and we fed them lunch. And we took them next door to the Monocacy Cemetery, which is a great old site and there's a wonderful little early nineteenth century chapel. And you go in, it's you know, open all the time, basically. You go in and there's a Confederate flag and a U.S. flag and a picture of Robert E. Lee and a picture of Stonewall Jackson and a banner sort of over, you know, the I guess it would be where the pulpit would be if you were having a ceremony, that basically said: "Lest We Forget" or something to that effect. It was something that was definitely Southern in its sympathies and we took Bill Hanna and Rose Crenca out there and we walked them around.

We showed them the chapel and it was like "Whoah! This is really," even though these were folks – Bill Hanna was from Rockville, Rose Crenca was from Silver Spring. These were native Montgomery countians; they had probably not ever been to Beallsville before. And when that group of sites came up for designation, I still remember there was a man named H. Dunbar Darby, who owned some of the property and he was an older man. He was vehemently opposed to designation. He sat up there at the council telling them how awful this was and Bill Hanna, who was an older man, too, who normally was very sympathetic to property owner concerns was normally pretty much not very sympathetic to historic preservation, sat there and he looked at Mr. Darby and he said: "You know Mr. Darby, most of the time I would agree with you. But I was out there and I saw this and I saw, you know, the chapel and I said, you know what? It's historic [laughs]. There's no way that you can't say that this is historic and I'm voting in favor of designation."

And I was just, wow, I was thrilled. Because it was, again, part of this effort of trying to get the planning board and the council to focus on preservation as being one of those things that's in the public interest and to spark their interest in the whole idea of preservation. To let them know how much great history we actually have in Montgomery County. You know I viewed those early designation processes mainly as big education efforts. Not just for the citizens, but for our planning board and our council. And a lot of times when I did designations I would do like a little, tiny mini-lecture on architectural history. You know, I would say, "Okay, now we're going to look at a property that's Gothic Revival. Here's how Gothic Revival sort of evolved as a style." And then I would actually start talking about the particular building, you know, but I would show some images from textbooks about, you know, Gothic Revival architecture.

So I did each of these as again sort of like a mini little educational outreach thing and that actually worked pretty well. It worked in the sense that at least the board and council we had at that time were interested in sort of learning about this. Interested in understanding where these buildings fit in a bigger context.

So we had a number through the late eighties and early nineties. We had a number of what I consider to be pretty successful designation efforts. We got the Takoma Park district designated with over nine hundred buildings in it. And there had been lots and lots of contentious meetings, but through all this outreach and work – in fact the City of Takoma Park was very helpful. They helped to appoint a task force, but it was so contentious that they brought in the, you know, Conflict Resolution Center of Montgomery County and the guy who was facilitating the task force, you know, told us: “Well, you know, before taking this job I worked with gangs in Los Angeles” or something [laughs]. We said, “Well this will be much harder than that!”

And by the time we got to the end of the process, though, when that final vote had to be taken up at the county council there was like – there were two speakers and they were both in favor of designation. I mean it was a very, very intense but positive process.

ROTENSTEIN: Can you point to a single point when official Montgomery County turned and fully recognized that historic preservation is in the public interest?

WRIGHT: No. Because sometimes I think it, you know, it's cyclical. We've had councils that were more supportive and understood that. We have had councils who have been less supportive. I think that – I think that the designation in a sense of the Beallsville Historic District was for me a little bit of a watershed moment because it was one of the, the times when you had almost 100 percent opposition to a designation but the council still voted in favor of that. I mean to this day in Prince Georges County, they have one locally-designated historic district and they've been working for years to get their second locally-designated historic district, which is College Park. And they have had a tremendous amount of trouble getting their council to just say this is designated whether the current property owners agree or not because it meets the criteria and it's in the public interest.

In Montgomery County, again with the folks who were on the planning board and council, I think they generally had a good sense of, you know, public interest as being important. Of course, you know, all politicians and appointed officials are very sensitive to what a property owner wants or doesn't want. And I can't say that we had – I'm sure before I arrived in '87 there had been properties where the owner had objected but the council designated it anyway. But it didn't happen as much. I mean when owners objected, the council backed off frequently.

Beallsville, I think, was a turning point in that you know, clearly the owners objected but clearly the site was historic and the council stood up for that. And I guess what was – in a way that was, I don't know what, a precursor to some of our bigger preservation fights down the road in Garrett Park and Chevy Chase Village where we had groups of citizens in a historic area basically just saying, “Yeah, we know we have historic structures but we just don't want your designation.” And the county council, being very brave and taking the stance that, you know, we understand

your feelings as owners, but we're looking at the greater public benefit and we're still going to designate.

I think Beallsville was probably, for me, a turning point because it was one of these first occasions where even the council members who were generally not fond of preservation stood up and said: "This is historic; I'm going to designate."

We had – I mean again, there were so many individual cases – individual cases that are interesting. We had a battle about a twentieth century site, the WTOP Transmitter Building in Wheaton, also in the early nineties and the owner – which was WTOP Radio – I mean they fought designation tooth and nail. And we, you know, had a lot of meetings with council members out at the site. We – again I used, tried to use this as an opportunity to educate. When we did our presentation to the council about the WTOP building and why it should be designated because it was this great International Style building. I sort of did a whole little dog and pony show about the International Style and, you know, did these slides of Le Corbusier's buildings and sort of, you know, showed how they were the genesis of some of the ideas behind the WTOP building and ultimately we got that designated, also, even though again we had a very wealthy, powerful property owner who spent a lot of money on architectural historians and legal fees to fight the designation.

ROTENSTEIN: Why do you think that historic preservation is in Montgomery County's public interest? What do you think the benefit is?

WRIGHT: Well, you know when I first came to Montgomery County I remember Susan driving me like up I-270 and I was thinking to myself: "Why did I move here? I mean, why am I working here? There's nothing historic." But actually there's a lot that's historic in Montgomery County and as I get into, you know, the longer I work here the more I realize how much historic – how much information about the historic development of the county is important and can help inform future planning and future ideas and how important the vestiges of those earlier times are to sort of building better, more humane communities.

I mean the places that we all look at and think are great, walkable communities that are great models of transit-oriented development, which is the, you know, catch phrase these days. Many of them are historic communities. Takoma Park, Kensington, Chevy Chase Village, for that matter; I mean those are the neighborhoods that have, you know, clear block patterns, community centers or civic buildings that people gather at. You know, they're some of the greatest neighborhoods and I think that we have had some recognition, some realization – at least in the planning department – that those are great models for what the future of the county might be. I'm very big on sort of saying, you know, I'm not at all against sort of, you know, innovation, new ideas, but I also think that you can learn a lot by looking at the historic development patterns of a community and letting those patterns inform future decisions.

And in my current job as the acting director of the planning department, I joke to folks, you know, every time some topic comes up, I sort of say, "And oh yes, in historic preservation we would have done this" or "I know about that because there's a historic site on the property." They – people tease me that, you know, it seems like historic preservation permeates everything.

And in some way it does. I mean I think that when we talk about building great communities, you have to look to what you start with, to what's there, and the best communities don't just wipe the slate clean and start over. They build on those historic development patterns.

So I think I've always seen historic preservation as very integral to the overall planning efforts for the county. It's not just some separate discipline off there by itself. Just as we've seen, you know, on the commercial side, the Silver Theatre and Shopping Center, you know, preserving those buildings has become a great focal point. It's one of the most enjoyed parts of downtown Silver Spring. That's not to say you can't have the juxtaposition of that with good new modern architecture, whether it be the Lee Building or the Discovery Channel Building or whatever. But having a center that recalls the history of the community in a way somehow, I think, grounds the community in some sort of fundamental way. And it usually also gives you a place that's, you know, very humanely scaled and just feels good to people.

So I think that we have hopefully seen over the years how preservation is in the public interest and, you know, I'd like to believe we're beyond fighting that battle although sometimes when you, you know, get a whole new slate of planning board members or a whole new slate of county council members, you sort of feel like you're starting from square one.

But anyway, we were sort of talking about how the historic preservation function and the planning department function got merged. So there were these two sort of parallel tracks going on of Bobbi Hahn having all these problems, leaving, a variety of other staff taking her place at Department of Housing and Community Development. The commissioners themselves I think as they kept having a different staff person every couple of years became dissatisfied. While at the same time I was building up a pretty good program, a pretty good reputation over here in the planning department. You know through some of these, again, very successful designation efforts whether it be Beallsville or WTOP or Takoma Park.

And I guess after Jared Cooper left and when Laura McGrath was staffing the commission and commissioners had, were expressing a fair amount of dissatisfaction with how things were going. Gus Bauman at that point chair of the planning board and we entered into, we entered into a discussion about possibly providing the staff support to the historic preservation commission and how we would do that. And it ended up being agreed through a negotiation with the county that we would do an annual contract between park and planning and Montgomery County whereby the county would essentially hire park and planning to provide staff support to this county executive branch commission which meant that they wouldn't have to staff it through the Department of Housing and Community Development any longer and they would give us at the commission a certain – at the park and planning commission – a certain amount of money each year to provide staff support.

That agreement occurred around 1991 and we got funding to hire at least one full-time and one part-time employee to help staff the commission. And this was a contract where the county just gave us cash, essentially, and we hired the staff and did all the staffing. I was lucky enough to hire a really, a couple of really wonderful staff people. Nancy Witherell, who's now at NCPC left the D.C. Office of Planning – and well it wasn't in the office of planning, it was at Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, but she left the D.C. preservation office and came to work as a full-time

employee at park and planning. And a guy named Bob Rivers, and Bob was again working somewhat on review of historic area work permits but also on designation work.

And you have to remember at that time, because we had fewer designated districts, less of our work was actually on historic area work permits; more was on designation. We might have, you know, if we had three or four historic area work permits per meeting that was a big agenda. That was a heavy meeting, you know, which is very different than now where we might typically have, you know, twelve.

They came on board, we kept our existing staff. It was – I think that one of the things that was really nice is we began to build a really professional preservation staff. It wasn't, you know, someone who had been a geographer – and again, nothing against Marty Reinhart – but you know someone who had been a geographer and was reassigned to deal with preservation. It wasn't sort of folks who had been thrown into the job, it was folks who really viewed historic preservation as their profession and came at it very professionally.

One of the decisions we made when we started staffing the historic preservation commission was that they would meet in the planning board auditorium and that we were really going to formalize things and we weren't going to have, you know, these sort of casual meetings where everyone sat around a conference room table. I had been at the park and planning commission for a while then. I had seen how the planning board functioned and to me that was the model. I had also seen how the historic district review board in Galveston, Texas, had operated and they also, you know had sat up at a dais and, you know, had a professional staff making recommendations and it was all, again, handled very professionally. And so those were sort of my models and I said that's what we're going to do.

Interestingly there was a little pushback at the time 'cause people said, you know, it's not going to be friendly enough. People will feel intimidated. And my reaction to some degree was, "Yes! That's the idea" [laughs]. Part of the goal here is to come across with a sense that you have authority, you know, you are a figure of authority, the commission is a figure of authority and that they don't, you know, swear and storm out of the room. You know, you behave yourself.

And so we sort of set up the whole process of how the meetings would be conducted. We created the process of having these, you know, expedited cases so that simpler cases could be handled with a minimum of muss and fuss. We continued on the process of looking at some of our very controversial designations.

We had a really controversial one in the town of Garrett Park. Garrett Park – this was in the mid, sort of mid-nineties; I think it was finished about '94. Garrett Park did not want the county involved in their designation. They knew they were historic but they could take care of themselves. And we sort of had to explain that you don't have planning and zoning authority so you can't take care of yourselves if you want to stop someone from tearing a historic structure down, the only way is to become a county historic district. You can't – you don't have the power to create a law that says you can't demolish a historic structure.

They didn't buy that, they didn't like it. We struggled with that designation. You know, they tried to go to the state legislature and tried to get, opt out of being under county planning and zoning, so we sort of had to fight it at the legislature. The long and short of it is ultimately they were designated in a seven to two vote at the county council. And with, again, a number of council members basically saying that we understand you don't like this, we understand you don't like being under the county, but you are and you meet the criteria and, you know, we think that preserving historic resources in Garrett Park is important and here you go: You're designated.

You know it's interesting, again, that some of these communities who fought, it's just been this you know very difficult situation, have been some of the ones that I think subsequently have most appreciated the designation. I mean I think in Garrett Park they were very concerned about mansionization and I think came to realize that the district has done a lot to avoid that problem in their community.

ROTENSTEIN: Chevy Chase Village wasn't a cakewalk either?

WRIGHT: Oh no [laughs]. That was probably the worst.

ROTENSTEIN: Of all the designations you've experienced?

WRIGHT: [Yes].

ROTENSTEIN: Can you tell me about the designation process there?

WRIGHT: It all started around 1996 when a person bought a house on West Lenox Street that was like a 1930s Colonial. It was a little rundown because, you know, it had been like an elderly person who had lived in it. It wasn't in terrible shape. It was a little rundown. They wanted to tear it down and build a very, very modernistic structure. Well the people on that block were very unhappy about that and they jumped in and they said this area is on the Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites. If you tear that building down you're going to have to go through the moratorium provision, the provisions under the moratorium on demolition and alteration.

We had a couple of fairly high-powered attorneys. Norman Knopf was representing the owner who wanted to tear the building down. Steve Orens was representing the neighbors who didn't want to see the building torn down. And we went through a process of evaluating and bringing forward for designation just that block; it was about fourteen houses altogether under the very strict time limits in Chapter 24A, Section 10. We ultimately got the small area designated, although with the provision that that house could be torn down but there would be design review of the new house that would be built in its place. And the council's – the whole thing was a very contentious process, that one-block designation.

The council basically said we don't want to keep going through this: "Go evaluate Chevy Chase." It was the biggest area identified on the Locational Atlas with probably in all the different sections of Chevy Chase we probably ended up surveying three thousand buildings or so. But they said, you know, this has been on the Atlas, we know you haven't – at that point it

was like, you know, for about twenty years – you haven't taken it up because it's such a big project, go do it. You know, we don't want any more of these contentious individual block arguments.

So we proceeded to begin work on Chevy Chase Village. And I tried to use a lot of the same tools, the things I had learned in Takoma Park. We had the village board of managers help us appoint a task force and we, you know, tried to negotiate the whole idea of categories of designation and review guidelines. Well, ultimately the village board of managers just didn't want designation. A lot of their reasons were again somewhat similar to Garrett Park which was we can take care ourselves, thank you very much. We don't want the county interfering.

So they hired Gus Bauman, who at that point was no longer planning board chairman. He had left the planning board to run for county executive; had not been elected and went back to private law practice. They hired Gus Bauman and Gus, you know, you're always in the most dangerous situation when someone who had been your ally suddenly becomes your foe because they know everything about you. And it became a real, real knock-down, drag-out fight on all grounds other than the substantive grounds. There was no way I think that anyone was going to argue from a substantive standpoint that Chevy Chase Village wasn't historic; it was. I mean that was clear. So the main arguments were on procedure and then on a political front, essentially how awful the historic preservation commission was, how awful staff was, how our decisions on cases were arbitrary and capricious, how we were out of control. We were an agency or an organization out of control. And Gus was the master of sort of using the media on these things. He was very, very good at, you know, taking his case to the court of public opinion.

So we on the procedural grounds, he had us scrambling. Because like many government agencies we were never, we had never done everything perfect procedurally. For example, the Chapter 24A had been changed in like 1984 or '85, I can't remember exactly when, to say that we needed to have executive regulations that were approved by the county council. Well, we never had gotten around to creating those executive regulations. There had been some drafts that had, you know, been kicked around and so forth but we had never completed it. Well Gus launched into that: "Well here's a group wasn't even function with, you know, the regulations required by the law; they were out of control; they were just doing what they wanted" – and so we had to quickly, quickly scramble to finish the executive regulations to take them forward, to get them approved by the council. Totally over his objections, you know, once we put those regulations together he basically wanted to argue why the council shouldn't act on them and why the regulations themselves were inappropriate. I mean it was, you know, it took us down this whole tangent on procedure that had nothing to do with Chevy Chase Village, but just on procedure.

However we successfully got the executive regs approved in 1997. We proceeded down this path of designation with again Gus basically – he had some of the citizens from Chevy Chase Village who were opposed to designation, came to our offices and went through, you know it's all public information, went through our historic area work permit files and found every case that the HPC had denied over like the last ten years or more, contacted each of those property owners who had had a denial and asked them to, you know, write a letter saying how awful the process had been. And if the owner wouldn't write a letter saying how awful the process had been, they did their own little summary of the process which they submitted under their name saying, you know,

here's an example of a horrible case. You know, so if they had an owner who wouldn't play ball they still brought up, you know, every denial.

So we ended up having to fight back and one of the things that I still remember that I was very pleased at being given the opening when Derrick Berlage was on the council and he was chair of the PHED committee and this was coming up. He said, you know when hearing all this how terrible it was and how awful it was, he said, "Well I'd like to hear from the elected officials in some of these municipalities where you have historic districts. If it's so awful, why aren't we hearing from these folks?"

You know, I said, "We'll get you letters."

So we ran out and we were able to get letters from the mayor and council in Kensington, from the mayor in Takoma Park, from the mayor in Garrett Park, from I can't remember, I think there was another municipality and it's not – Somerset, you know, from the mayor in Somerset. Basically, you know, all saying: "You know, look, it's never pleasant. Sometimes we agree, sometimes we disagree, but it's pretty much what we expected and we think the commission acts rationally and, you know, we don't see this as a group out of control. You know, it's working for our communities."

So we also had to run around and get folks who had been through the historic area work permit process and had been happy to, you know, write letters.

It was a very, very contentious time. We, you know, talked a lot about boundaries, you know, what you could do – Bill Hanna, who was still on the council at that time was trying to push us to look and see if there were boundaries that could be a smaller historic District with a few individually designated sites. But we pushed for a district that recognized not just the buildings but also the whole development pattern of Chevy Chase and the layout of the streets and all of that.

And, again, very emotional, very contentious. They ultimately designated the Chevy Chase Village district with about three hundred and twenty-six buildings. Seven to two vote at the council in favor of designation. I remember it well because I had, I had just had my first child. My daughter was born February 13 and the final vote, although we knew pretty much how it was going to go – you know, we felt confident – was like February 20 or, you know, it was a week or so after my daughter had been born and I remember it was one of the first times I left her with, you now, just my husband and, you know, had to go in, had to be there for that, you know, final vote because it had been, you know, a very, very big part of my life for two years or more.

That district's now again been in place for – hard to believe – but it's going on ten years. Yeah, if it was 1998 and it's now 2007. And, you know, all of the fears that people expressed of, you know, property values going down, people not being able to live in their houses, and the world coming to an end. I mean none of that's happened. If you've been through Chevy Chase Village, I think it looks, you know, it looks fine and dandy. And in fact, in a couple of cases, again, folks who had been very opposed to designation came to hearings because they were happy that the commission was putting some constraints on some project on their block, you know, on their

particular block. They would never admit it, to this day, if you talk to them I'm sure none of them would ever admit it, but I think many of the folks even those who had been opposed to designation would agree that it's helped their community in a number of cases.

So we've had, again, this series of contentious designations but we've worked our way through most of the really big evaluations on the Atlas. We still have a number of small, rural historic districts and individual sites that need to be evaluated. But we don't have another big, big district like Chevy Chase or Takoma Park. And that had been one of my goals when I came on the scene was that, you know, a lot of these big districts hadn't been touched; it just seemed like it was too much to take on and I knew we had to take it on because otherwise we would have all these properties sort of in limbo on the Atlas but not really designated.

And we have been staffing the commission since 1991, so that's about sixteen years now and I think we've gotten things down to a good system. I think the commission, very honestly, operates as well if not better than any of the other various county boards and commissions that I see. I go to planning board meetings and board of appeal meetings and county council meetings for that matter and I think in general the HPC runs itself as professionally, as clearly, and again, providing good public services. It does as good a job as any of those groups, probably better.

ROTENSTEIN: How has the HPC evolved?

WRIGHT: Well I think that we've always been very lucky in Montgomery County to have a good pool of people applying to be on the HPC. We've always had folks who had a good level of expertise. You know, people like Eileen McGuckian or her husband Phil Cantelon, both of whom at different times served on the HPC. We've had over the years landscape architects like Holt Jordan, building renovators like Joe Brenneman. We've had a really, I think a good group of people on the commission.

I would say the commission that we have today probably is the most professional in the sense that the actual members of the commission have sort of amazing professional backgrounds that are pertinent to the work of historic preservation. You know we have, you know folks like Caroline Alderson who, you know, is a real preservation leader at GSA. And, you know, Tom Jester who works for, you know, a wonderful preservation architectural firm and also in his work with the National Park Service actually wrote some of the Preservation Briefs, you know at the National Park Service. I mean we have a really good commission right now.

I think that, you know, one thing that I think we haven't done in a while that I would like us to get back to doing is it used to be that the commission would actually have once or twice a year meetings out in the community at sites other than park and planning. And they did this to give citizens an opportunity just to see how all of the commission operates and to, you know, do a little more outreach. I think it would be good for us to get back to doing that because there's always a balance between being, you know, highly professional, highly competent and always this need to be sort of in touch with the community, in touch with political realities. I think we as a commission it would be good to get folks, you know, more connected with council members.

We used to have folks like again, you know Eileen McGuckian and others who had a lot of political connections, political savvy. We don't have as much of that, although Warren Fleming who's one of the members of the commission now, I think, has a lot of political savvy. But I think we need to build on that 'cause it's important for the commission to not forget to sort of always be reaching out, always educating and not just the citizens who live in the historic districts and the historic sites but the elected and appointed officials. You know, reminding them why preservation is so important.

Just before, I want to get one other sort of tangent tied in here. In 1995 there was a decision at the park and planning commission to combine the departments of park and planning into one department. And at that time Mike Dwyer and two archaeologists who worked with him, Jim Sorensen and Heather Bouslog, joined the historic preservation section. So for the first time in the county there truly was one historic preservation office for the entire county. It had about twelve people in it and that included the staff of the historic preservation commission, the staff that dealt with designation work at the planning board, and the staff that dealt with park-owned historic resources.

In the late nineties, early two-thousands, I think we spent a lot of time and attention on that third group, the publicly-owned, park-owned cultural resources. We began in the late nineties trying to get the planning board interested in the idea of not just continuing to, I don't know, be – to warehouse these buildings but to think about how to actively utilize them. We brought a woman named Susan Soderberg on board and she began actively recruiting docents for Oakley Cabin and working to get Oakley Cabin, which is a park and planning commission-owned site, working to get it open on a regular basis to the public.

We had to get a few other projects done like completing a parking lot for Oakley Cabin, which had been on the boards to be done for a long time but had sort of fallen, you know, to the back burner. We pushed that project forward, got it completed so that we actually could have visitors to the cabin 'cause there'd be a place for them to park. Susan also got very involved in, with our trail staff in helping to create the Rural Legacy Trail.

All of this was happening at a time when the, some of the commissioners, particularly a fellow named Doug Harbit who was on the commission at the time, were really interested in the whole idea of heritage tourism and the state was beginning a program called the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority. It was a program that was created by Cass Taylor, who was I guess – I don't know if he was a delegate or a senator from western Maryland and he wanted to promote Cumberland and created this program about – statewide program – about heritage tourism partly to funnel money and to promote Cumberland.

But it became a whole statewide program and we, a little late in the game, opted to get involved and were able to get grant funds to do both the steps in the state process – first you have to do a recognized heritage area application and then a certified heritage area management plan. So we got grant funding, we completed those efforts, we became a state-certified heritage area in I think that was like 2001. Lots of community meetings, lots of debate about what the boundaries of the heritage area should be, you know, what does it really mean? But we were able to get the state certification which actually provides some funding for both operations and capital improvements

and educational programs. And then we spun off that effort by encouraging the creation of a private nonprofit called Maryland – I'm sorry – the Montgomery County Heritage Alliance.¹

And that group hired as its executive director Peggy Erickson and Peggy has done a great job in taking that, the concepts in the certified heritage area management plan and really running with it. We have a Heritage Weekend every year at the end of June. I think this past year they estimate they had about fourteen thousand people attending more than twenty historic sites around Montgomery County. She's worked really hard on some public outreach and education efforts. They did that wonderful poster of barns in Montgomery County. They've done driving tours that you can take off the Web site; created a great Web site. Now they're taking a look at the possibility of working with the conference and visitors bureau to redo the barn at the Waters House in Germantown as a conference and visitors bureau site as well as a place to promote county history.

And again, that's one of the projects I'm very proud of and very pleased that we were essentially the original catalyst for. One of the great things, one of the successful things is when you're able to be the catalyst for something that you don't actually have to do every last step in the process. That you're able to create a program, spin it off, find really competent people to carry it forward, and then let them do that. And that's worked very, very well in this instance.

The other thing that we did with historic properties on parkland is that we finally after a lot of years of discussion published a strategic plan for cultural resources on parkland and the document is – that was in, I believe, 2005. The document is called *From Artifact to Attraction* and is the basic theme that we've been promoting since the late nineties is that we need to take our county-owned and park and planning-owned historic sites and not just have them be these artifacts but actually have them be attractions.

So that has been a whole additional effort that's consumed a lot of my time and attention, you know, from the late nineties to the early 2000s. That again is different than the work with the historic preservation commission. And actually is a little more connected with the work that I did years ago with the Galveston Historical Foundation.

So in let's see, what year was it? I can't believe it was 2004 but I think it was 2004, we had our twenty-fifth anniversary of the county preservation program; our ordinance had been passed in September of 1979. And we had a wonderful event at Hayes Manor and our keynote speaker was Dick Moe, who's president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and we had I think a wonderful turnout of many of the people who have helped make this program grow over the years. And I was just really, really proud at that particular event. I was really happy to be there. I was so happy to have seen how the program has grown over twenty-five years.

Again, you know, starting with just a few very committed but not sort of professional staff people scattered around different agencies in county government with very limited numbers of designations. You know, with a lot of animosity and antagonism at the planning board and county council about designation and how, you know, over twenty-five years we were able to

¹ Heritage Tourism Alliance of Montgomery County.

move this into what I think is truly a professional preservation program that is well-regarded in the state, it's well regarded, you know, by our elected and appointed officials. I think they know we've got our act together and it's been very fulfilling to think that we've been, we've come so far.

ROTENSTEIN: When you first arrived in the county, you were telling me about the focus on nineteenth century resources. Over the past couple of decades, the idea of historic preservation's now grown to include properties that were built in some cases well after both of us were born.

WRIGHT: [Yes].

ROTENSTEIN: Tell me about the changes in perception of historicity in Montgomery County?

WRIGHT: Well, you know it still is always a challenge. I think people find it generally just difficult to understand that buildings built around the time they're born could be considered historic. So when I arrived in '87, I was dealing with a lot of planning board and county council members who, you know, probably had been born in the 1920s and thirties who were, you know, at that point, you know, in their sixties. And they, the idea of Art Deco being historic was just really hard for them to put their, to wrap their heads around because these buildings were the same age as them. They couldn't get it.

And I think that's something each generation faces and is challenged with. I mean it wasn't all that long ago that Victorian buildings were not viewed as historic and the only thing that was historic were Colonial buildings. And that's because, again, many people grew up in these old Victorian houses; it's what they knew as children. It was so hard for them to sort of think of it as important. I think that's why it's important, actually the fifty-year rule that the National Register has is somewhat important because I think you do need a little distance frequently to understand the significance of a historic building.

But I think we've moved to a point where certainly Art Deco, there's no question. People love it, it's historic – [Silver] Theatre and Shopping Center have been a big success and we're starting now to just begin to face the challenges of mid-twentieth century architecture. It was very, our big effort to designate the COMSAT building was one of our major forays into this effort. And I was very disappointed that that did not succeed; although I think there were a lot of political forces at work.

I also think very honestly that our current board and council have a little less of this sense of public interest than the previous generation of elected and appointed officials have. I think folks have become for whatever reason very [pause] political, very pragmatic, very looking for sort of immediate returns, not having a good sense of the long picture, you know, the long-range picture of things. I've thought a lot about this. I don't know if it's a generational thing or if it, you know, happens to be the folks who are in office right now or what it is. Part of me thinks it is a generational thing. I think that folks who are in their forties and fifties [pause] don't have as much of a sense of sort of what it takes to build a society as our parents' generation did. I mean they really did call our parents generation, you know, "the greatest generation." And there was this real understanding in that generation of sacrifice. You know, they lived through the

Depression. They lived through World War II. They understood that sometimes you do need to make sacrifices for the greater public good.

You know, our generation grew up a bit more spoiled and I think that we have a harder time sort of understanding this concept of greater public good. I mean this is all just philosophical, but it does concern me. And I see that a lot in decisions I see being made by our county council, particularly. I'm thrilled that on the planning board now we have Royce Hanson back as chairman 'cause he's part of that "greatest generation." He's older, he's in his seventies and he does have this sense, you know, of the greater public good and he's trying to imbue that I think within the other board members. But I don't think our council gets it. They're very, you know, much sort of the means justify the end and – or the end justifies the means [laughs] – and, you know, let's just, you know, do what seems to be expedient at this moment in time. I mean it concerns me.

But, so I was disappointed in the COMSAT decision by the board but I actually, I wasn't disappointed in our staff presentation, our arguments. The board, I think completely – I mean none of them argued with the fact that this was a historic building. None of them argued with the fact that it was important both in terms of who designed it and what the functions that took place within the building were. They just didn't want to designate it because they didn't want to limit the development potential on that particular site.

So it was a very – you know, maybe on the one hand they were, they were, you know, balancing that trade off that I talked about that the planning board wanted to do on Silver Spring and in this case the balance fell in favor of the development. But I don't really know whether that's true 'cause I think that we showed them, I felt like we showed them pretty clearly, how you could get your cake and eat it too. How you could have the development and keep the building.

As it turns out, I think, you know, there will be some negotiation that takes place so that the building will be retained. But it's all sort of being done behind closed doors, it's not being done within the context of a master plan or you know in a very transparent public process and that concerns me.

But anyway, back to your question. Twentieth century sites are going to become more and more important because so much of Montgomery County was developed in the twentieth century. However, I think that there's really going to be only a smattering of sites that will merit designation because a lot of our twentieth century development from the fifties on has been pretty expedient, pretty poor. And we haven't had as a county a lot of great focus on architecture for a good part of the twentieth century – for a good part of the second half of the twentieth century. But there are a few of those just outstanding sites out there, COMSAT being one of them, certainly, that are special, that can give that kind of, you know, grounding in a more humane past that I was mentioning before. You know, and that will be very important as we move forward with new development. So I think we're going to just have to turn up the education [laughs] focus a little bit more and get back to trying to reeducate our elected and appointed officials about why mid- and late-twentieth century buildings are important.

ROTENSTEIN: What do you think the biggest challenges facing the historic preservation program are at this stage where you're leaving, we're now seven years into a new century; things are changing throughout the county. What are the challenges?

WRIGHT: I would say the big challenges are, you know, number one, we need to find a really strong staff leader. That's really important and we have good applications that have come in but we need I think collectively to work at finding someone who will be very strong and getting the program forward. We need to, I think, refocus on a lot of that kind of education and outreach, whether it be on the importance of twentieth century resources or just generally on the preservation program. I think that we have – well, I mean very honestly, a lot of my time in the late nineties, early 2000s was spent on these cultural resources on parkland and in heritage tourism and all that kind of thing and I probably did not do as much of, you know, driving county council member around and showing them historic sites as I did back in the late eighties, early nineties. And we need to get back to doing that. We need to just constantly be reeducating our elected and appointed officials about historic preservation and building those bridges and building those constituencies and, you know, doing that kind of outreach. I feel like we haven't done enough of that and I think it's going to be important to get back to it.

I think that as we, I mean on a very technical side, as we move into an era of a lot of new synthetic materials, we will I think be under increasing pressure to look at how those new materials can be used in historic buildings. I think this is going to be a challenge not just in Montgomery County, but for preservation as a whole and we have to figure out, you know, where you draw those limits, where you draw the lines and have that be very clear.

I truly, you know, do believe very, very strongly that as you with a historic building, as you change each little piece of it, you lose its sense of historicity. I mean the analogy I always used was if you had a beautiful Tiffany lamp that was worth a \$100 thousand and over the years you would say: "Oh, this little piece of glass is cracked so I'm going to replace it" and "This lead isn't as straight as I'd like it to be so I'm going to, you know, have that leading redone" and "Oh, I'm going to change this, I'm going to change that." Eventually, you would end up with a Tiffany lamp that's not a Tiffany lamp that's the same lamp you could buy at Marlo's or something and it's not going to be worth \$100 thousand, it's going to be worth, you know, a thousand dollars or something because every part of it will be new. It won't be an old antique lamp any more and I think buildings are sort of that way.

If you, you know, chip away, say, "Oh, we'll replace just the windows but the rest of it will be historic" or "We'll let the siding all be replaced with Hardiplank but everything else will be historic" and "Yeah, that decking is really hard to maintain so we'll allow it to be Trex." Eventually, the end result of all those changes is that you end up with a building that would look great on Disney World's Main Street or something but it's not a historic building. And I think that's going to be a challenge because as these new materials come on line there will be more and more pressure to use them.

But I mean those are some of the challenges and I think it's just the biggest is just keeping preservation in the forefront of people's minds and keep – you know if I've learned anything, it's that the job of education, the job of promoting preservation is never done. You think you have

succeeded and you think you've done a good job and then suddenly here you have a whole new group of elected and appointed officials who come in or new property owners. I've seen this even in a situation where we had an owner of a historic house who was great, who was very sympathetic, who wanted to work with us and then they eventually, you know, got transferred to Wisconsin or something and had to move away and a new person moves in and you're starting all over again off saying, "No, you can't replace your windows" and "No, you can't do this," but it, you know it's never ending. It's not like you can say: "Okay, education, we've checked it off our list. We've done it." It's going to have to just be a never ending task.

ROTENSTEIN: One last question: What do you think your greatest accomplishment has been with the historic preservation program?

WRIGHT: I mean holistically I think it's that we've taken it from this disparate group – I don't mean desperate like, you know, Desperate Housewives, but disparate I guess, group of offices that – you know, none of which was taken very seriously within their own agency and we have combined those offices and strengthened them so that I think our preservation recommendations are taken seriously. We're viewed as competent professionals; we aren't viewed as, you know, little old ladies in tennis shoes telling people what color to paint their mailboxes. And we – we can actually effect positive change, both in historic districts and through the lessons we've learned from our work in historic districts that is applicable elsewhere.

I mean I think that, you know, [pause] a testimony to the fact that preservation's taken seriously is that I'm the acting director of the planning department. I mean I was the preservation supervisor and I think it's partly my own personality, but I think it's partly that, you know, I was viewed as a legitimate planning professional who could move up within the agency. I don't think that in 1987 Bobbi Hahn would have ever been considered if Rick Ferrara had left, you know, to move up to become the director of the Department of Housing and Community Development. She was marginalized; she was sort of off to the side doing her little thing. And I think if I've accomplished anything, it's that preservation isn't off to the side doing its little thing; it's part of the planning process and our staff, including me, have been viewed as integral parts of the planning staff and we've been able to effect change that way, so. So that's probably it.

ROTENSTEIN: Alright. Well I thank you for enduring this.

WRIGHT: No, this was great.

--- End of Interview ---

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