

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Thom Bess

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Thom Bess conducted by Interviewer Inna Guzenfeld on October 28, 2008. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive's Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Thom Bess grew up in the Longwood neighborhood of the Bronx and lived there into his adult years. As an adult he was instrumental in organizing his neighbors to campaign for the designation of the Longwood Historic District. He subsequently helped create the Longwood Historic District Association to provide preservation assistance to residents of the district. Bess later became involved in preservation in Harlem and served as a board member on the Historic Districts Council. In this interview, Bess describes his and his neighbors' motivations to preserve Longwood as a historic district and the activities he and fellow organizer Marilyn Smith undertook to build support for preservation in the low-income community. He also links the movement to preserve Longwood to the broader context of preservation in New York City in the 1970s and 1980s.

Thom Bess began his career as a court reporter. Inspired by his home neighborhood of Longwood in the Bronx, he turned to historic preservation, becoming a staunch advocate for historic sites in the Bronx and Harlem. After co-founding the Longwood Historic District Community Association in the late '70s, Bess was instrumental in revitalizing Longwood's historic brownstones and supporting new development in the historic district. He is a former board member of the Historic Districts Council and has been active with the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington DC.

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Session: 1

Interviewee: Thom Bess

Location: Unknown

Interviewer: Inna Guzenfeld

Date: October 28, 2008

Q: This is October 28th. This is Inna Guzenfeld interviewing Thom Bess. Are we ready to begin?

Bess: Yes.

Q: I know that your family moved from Harlem to the South Bronx in 1944. Can you tell me what some of their motivations were?

Bess: My family owned brownstones on 123rd Street in Harlem, about twelve. The time came when Harlem was no longer the Harlem that they wanted and loved. Which meant—and this is interesting—there were no stores, grocery stores, allowed on 7th Avenue because it was a boulevard and you didn't dare go there unless you were dressed. The men would have on their spats *[laughs]* and the ladies with hats and pocket books and gloves. All of that changed around 1940, and I don't know that for sure. They didn't want to stay in Harlem anymore and they said well, we would go up to the Bronx—it was not called the South Bronx. So they found a wonderful home and we moved there in 1944. Fourteen rooms, three stories, plus basement.

Q: Wow.

Bess: Yes.

Q: Can you describe the street on which you lived?

Bess: Yes, it was wonderful. Across the street from the houses was an Episcopal church, St. Margaret's. The church was in—it was a triangle that it formed. The church had an iron gate all around the property. The Jewish families in the neighborhood all sat out there every day to catch the sun. In the mornings, they sat on one side, and in the afternoon they sat on the other and then later in the afternoon, then they'd go home. This was every day. The neighborhood was quite diverse. There were Italians, Irish, Blacks, and Jews.

Q: What was the street called?

Bess: It was 156th Street. 156th Street, between Kelly and Dawson.

Q: What are some of your early recollections of Longwood? I remember reading that there were many artists, musicians there at the time.

Bess: I don't know. I don't remember. I was a kid. I just played stickball in the street with the others *[laughs]*. I don't remember that too much. I know that the buildings were beautiful buildings and we always appreciated them. It was only later that I realized that people who lived in the surrounding areas, one of whom was Colin Powell—and also another person was Fernando Ferrer. Freddy always used to say, they wouldn't come up to where those brownstones were because it was like the sacrosanct—they didn't want to disrupt anything. They were very

well made. They had a front yard where people would sit, and you could speak to your neighbors. It was very nice. A very warm, inviting neighborhood.

Q: This would be skipping ahead a bit, but how did you become involved with preservation?

Bess: That opens up the Longwood Story. In the 70's, the Bronx started burning down. That's what prompted President [James "Jimmy" E.] Carter to come and go to Charlotte Street. A friend of mine and I—she lived diagonally across from where I lived—she was over, and we were just talking, we were upstairs. I had the top floor as my own personal apartment and my family lived downstairs. We were upstairs and we had bay windows. We were standing in the window and we were saying, "What a magnificent neighborhood that was," that you could look out and see. We had a wonderful vantage point, looking over at the church. One of us said—I don't remember which one—"Gee, it's a shame the way houses are burning – people are getting scared and they're moving out. That's going to change the character and personality of this whole area. Maybe we should try to do something."

So, we wound up at the community planning board, which is Community Planning Board 2 in the Bronx. There was a wonderful district manager there, whose name right now I can't remember and we told him of our concern. He said, "Well, you know, why don't you two just come to the board meetings and listen?" So we did. Then one day Marilyn [Smith] got a call or I got a call, I don't remember which, and he said, "You know, have you guys ever thought about historic designation for that area because your houses are so lovely?" We said "No, we hadn't thought about it." He said, "Well, why don't you think about it?" And we did. We went back up

to the board and we talked with the board about it and then we made formal application with the district manager's help. We made formal application to the Landmarks Preservation Commission [LPC]. Kent Barwick was the Chair at that time, and Lenore [Norman] was his assistant. We applied in 1979 and I'm not clear—it's either July of '79 or July of '80. I may have been wrong.

Q: Is that the designation or the application?

Bess: The designation.

Q: 1980, because I think—

Bess: It was '80, yes.

Q: Based on what I read, it was put to the Landmarks Commission in 1979.

Bess: Before they designate it, it needs to have a public hearing. For the first time, they left their lofty halls and they came to the Bronx for the hearing at the Bronx County Courthouse on 161st Street. We marshaled all the neighbors that we could over there, including those in wheelchairs, to support the position that this was a neighborhood very worthy of being saved. It was successful and they went back and they voted designation. Thus, we had the Longwood Historic District. That came in July of '80.

Q: You've often said in interviews that Longwood itself is somewhat removed from the surrounding parts of the South Bronx. How did the borough's decline affect Longwood, if at all?

Bess: It didn't.

Q: That's interesting.

Bess: It didn't. People really loved their homes. Our position was clear. When I say "our," I mean me and Marilyn. We adopted the motto of Banana Kelly and it was, "don't move, improve." Now, the big piece here is, before we applied for designation—we didn't dare do that without the neighbors saying, "yes, we want it." The onus of getting them to want to do that—because preservation did not have a good name in low income areas. People felt that they were being told what to do with their homes and how they had to do it. They did not understand the Landmarks Law. What she and I did—we held meetings, town hall meetings, in the auditorium across the street at the Episcopal church—St. Margaret's. She and I—we'll never forget it, because it was wonderful—we rang 144 doorbells for the whole area, inviting them to come to a meeting that we would hold to discuss what we were going to do to save our homes.

The first meeting was very well attended, people came. What I realized, what Marilyn realized, was that people needed to ventilate, to get all of that anxiety out of them. They were frightened, they were worried—it was their property, their investment. They had initially wanted to be able to pass these homes down to their children, but now people wanted out. We just let them talk. Then we scheduled a second meeting, again, letting them talk. I don't remember whether it was

the second or the third meeting we finally said, “Okay, we’ve gone over this before now. We’re repeating ourselves. We have some suggestions. What about applying for landmark designation, and that would save these homes?” Thus, we had their permission and they supported that. We were able to go to the Landmarks Commission and then later we got the designation.

Q: I’ve read that many local efforts to stem crime and arson, which was rampant in the South Bronx—they were really part of a larger effort to revitalize the South Bronx. I was wondering if you were involved in any of these efforts.

Bess: No, we were an entity unto ourselves.

Q: How did you and Marilyn get the idea to form the Longwood Historic District Community Association?

Bess: Kent Barwick, with his wonderful foresight, said, “Well, you know, you’re now designated. Why don’t we bring some of the Commissioners up to Longwood and let’s have some community meetings like you’ve been doing and let’s talk about how to preserve and thus appreciate what you have and how to maintain it.” These meetings were set up and all kinds of things were discussed and it was absolutely wonderful. As a result of those meetings, we began to hear our neighbors, whom we had known all of our lives, talking about lintels on windows and all kinds of stuff *[laughs]*. I was tickled. I thought it was wonderful. It developed a sense of wanting to preserve the neighborhood. Now, your question was—what?

Q: How did you form the Historic District Association?

Bess: So, after Kent and the Commission stopped seeing us—and at that time, we were meeting in the Lynch P.A.L. Center [Police Athletic Leagues Lynch Center]. It was a huge area. It had been a farm earlier. We were meeting there and we said, “Well, what are we going to do?” We said, “First of all, we need to come up with a name for the area.” We knew it was called the Longwood Historic District by the Preservation Commission, but we wanted an association. Again, I think the community planning board may have given us some direction there. We then—I remember this meeting, it was interminable—we met to come up with a name, and we came up with the name Longwood Historic District Community Association.

Then we thought, “Well, we’re going to need funding to get some programs done.” Someone at the Landmarks Commission sort of steered us in the right direction. We began calling other historic districts and talking to them. The very first thing that we got that was really spectacular was a grant to do a facade and street improvement program. This gave each homeowner \$2,000, because it was a grant, to fix up the facades of their building. It created that sense of uniformity that makes districts unique. We were able to offer money—well, that went over very big *[laughs]*, so it was very successful. Then we went to the people who came up with the “I love New York” slogan, they were helping us.

We went all over the city, Marilyn and I, just talking to historic districts and people who knew about the historic process and the value of these. We would just sit and talk. That’s how we got started. What I was thinking—someone had to sell their home. Up to that point, those houses

were going for like \$19,000. Because of the designation, a person got \$35,000. Well, that did it [*laughs*]. Everybody realized the value then of the historic designation. Then we began trying to get money to help people do internal repairs in their homes. One of the friends of Marilyn came up with the idea, “You know I know of this woman whose name is Anita Miller. She is with an arm of the Ford Foundation and it’s called LISC [Local Initiatives Support Corporation]. I think you guys should talk to her.”

Well, we did. We spoke to Anita and she came up to my house and we sat in the living room. We spent hours talking and she said, “the reason for the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, which is LISC, is that we look to agencies, into communities like yours where you’re doing self-help and we try to help.” With that help came money to hire an executive director who came out of Chicago. LISC paid for her to move her family to New York, to put them up in housing until they found something more permanent, and to set up our office. Thus, the Association began its work helping to address the needs of the homeowners in Longwood.

Q: Were there other city and non-governmental organizations that funded you? I’m just curious how you came to their attention.

Bess: Yes, we got a lot of money. We had four people on staff. We had benefits for them. We set up—with the help of Anita Miller and a woman that she sent up to help us, Jane Stanecky. Jane was a vice president at Bowery Savings Bank. She came up to help us set up a soft bank, where we did not have to have rigid rules that you had to prove if you borrowed money that you could pay back. Anita’s position—and I certainly thought it was wonderful—was that we knew

the people. We knew our neighbors. We knew who paid their bills and who didn't. So if they came and said, "You know, I need new windows." I don't remember the year now, but I think those houses went up in 19—I used to know the years, I think 19—it was the turn of the century.

Q: I think it was 1897 to 1903.

Bess: I think you're right. They had wooden windows. These windows, many of them needed replacement. We needed to make sure, since we were a historic district, that the right windows went in. Unfortunately, people jumped the gun and the word was out and so these companies went ringing doorbells themselves and they put in those aluminum windows. We were against that, but there was nothing we could do. But there were those who did replace their windows with wooden windows. So that was one reason where they might have needed some money, to do that. They borrowed from us and I think the payback rate was like 3%. But it was terribly successful. That's how we became an entity that was known around the city. Longwood became very successful.

Then I—because I talk so much—I was called by either Kent, or maybe this time Gene Norman had come in as the Chair of the Commission. We had several meetings and then someone called and said, "You know, there's an issue with St. Bartholomew's in Manhattan. It's a preservation issue and we would like you to come with us. We're having a freedom ride up to Albany to address one of the subcommittees in Albany." We all met at Grand Central Station and Mayor [Edward I.] Koch was there and we had breakfast and then we got on the train. Jackie [O.] Kennedy came with us, and we went up. It was a whole day. Well, that did it.

Then the next thing I know, I got a phone call when I go to with them to Washington to talk one of the house subcommittees again on the inner-city problem. That became the handle that I used. Marilyn was very helpful because I could discuss everything with her, but she had a husband and children and a family, and grandparents. My being single—I was able to do the traveling, and so I did. I went to Washington and spoke before subcommittees on the inner-city problem, because we had survived it and that's how it got started.

Q: Just to talk about the designation process itself. I'm curious if there were any communities that you looked to as models for your efforts initially.

Bess: No because we became, I think, unique. We were the second district designated in the entire Bronx, the first being on Alexander Avenue and it was only one block. We were, I think, fifteen blocks, so we were large. Did we look to anyone? No, it was, you know, trial and error.

Q: Did you encounter any opposition from Longwood and also maybe outside of Longwood in the surrounding neighborhood?

Bess: Not at all. They were very proud of what we had done.

Q: I'm curious if you or any of the members of the association had any prior experience dealing with city agencies that made the process somehow easier or less intimidating.

Bess: No. We had formed a board of directors, of course, made up of homeowners. Marilyn and I co-chaired the board. No, we didn't have any problems. In terms of how did we deal with city agencies—that's what our executive director of the association did. She smoothed out the way. Even though she was from Chicago, she knew how to wheel and deal. We got lots of grants for various projects, so we were fortunate.

Q: Would you say that weren't really any challenges in the designation process for you?

Bess: There may have been, and I just don't remember. We were talking 1979, 1980.

Q: Yes.

Bess: But I know Kent said to me later, "Your designation went through faster than most of them in the city." It never is that fast. We went through—from the time we applied—I think it was a little less than a year.

Q: Why was that the case? If you know.

Bess: I don't. I mean, I think Mayor Koch and the Commission may have wanted to say, "See, we've gone into the inner-city." The Bronx was having all of that notoriety and celebrity and they wanted to say, "We're working with them and here we now have put together and are helping a historic district." I think a lot of it was political.

Q: Who are some of the major players that helped move the designation process forward?

Bess: Kent Barwick. Lenore. Lenore was his secretary or assistant, and I can't remember her last name, but she was wonderful. Of course, Kent was extremely busy, but she was always available when I called or if Marilyn called. Who were some of the other players? Our community board was supportive. The district manager. I guess that was it, and Marilyn and I did the rest. We wrote letters and made phone calls. But the designation process was not difficult for us. Of course, we were young *[laughs]*. That helped.

Q: One of the wonderful things about this was that the LPC [Landmarks Preservation Commission] sent people to Longwood. I understand they came maybe twice a week or so to educate you about architectural details. I was wondering how that affected the way the residents saw the neighborhood.

Bess: Big time. I remember one meeting, one of the board members came in very upset because someone had painted the façade of their building on Dawson Street, and I couldn't believe it. I think they wound up leaving it, but the word went out. You do not do that. Because they saw that was an eyesore; it wasn't nice. We had a lot of educating to do in our community. We had to explain why you wouldn't use aluminum windows, why you did not sandblast that wonderful brick. All kinds of things. Why you restore—why you try to restore as much as possible. Whenever you did anything to improve, you went back to the original. So that's the kind of thing that went out and it was accepted. Remember, we were giving these people money. So, money talks *[laughs]*.

Q: I didn't actually know this until I looked at LPC's website, but Longwood was extended in 1983. Could you tell me about that and your involvement?

Bess: The core of Longwood—the buildings were all contiguous. Then there was a break, and there were two blocks—Macy Place and Hewitt Place—that had wonderful buildings. They didn't have the half-mansard roofs that we had, but they were wonderful brownstones. We felt, let's protect that too. That's the area we walked to to get to the subway. So, why not protect that area? So we did. We talked to the Commission. They went up and did their surveys and in 1983 those two blocks were also designated.

Q: Was the designation process this time around just as easygoing as the one before?

Bess: It was done before I realized it *[laughs]*.

Q: What tools and lessons did you take away from that designation process the first time around?

Bess: Be nice to people *[laughs]*. That's it. If you're nice to people, they're nice with you. They had to give us some bad news every once in a while, but we worked everything out. So, what we carried away? I don't know.

Q: Did any of the surrounding communities or any organizations approach you to learn from your experience?

Bess: Absolutely. The Forest Avenue houses on 165th. They called constantly for us to come up and meet with their little group, their steering committee, I guess. We told them what to do. They have since been designated. Yes, we met with several groups about our success. Of course, we became very friendly with Freddy [Fernando] Ferrer. Do you know that name?

Q: Yes.

Bess: Okay. Freddy was the Director of Small Homes for the then borough president. Then he became a city councilman. He and his wife, Aramina, would come to my house with me and Marilyn and the four of us became very good friends. We just talked about how do we make sure this process is going to work. That was a wonderful ally we made with Freddy. Of course, after he became borough president also.

Q: Now, I read an interview with you. This was 1990 in *Village Views*. You may remember that—

Bess: Christabel Gough.

Q: Yes. It seemed there was this idea that Landmarks [Preservation Commission] was neglecting communities of color in the '70s and the '80s.

Bess: That was the thought. That was the thought because—did I really say that? *[laughs]*

Q: The interesting thing was that you didn't, but they asked you about that repeatedly and you didn't respond to that.

Bess: Well because, I'm thinking back and I'm saying, why would I have said that? I don't think that they neglected, I just don't think there was enough knowledge about the preservation process that was known for people to go and approach the Commission. Had we not had our district manager, this would have never happened for us.

Q: So he was the one acting as the—

Bess: He was the catalyst.

Q: Catalyst. Okay. Now, of the people who were involved in the process, how many, would you say stayed on the Longwood radar? Was this an issue that people really continued to work on?

Bess: They stayed. We didn't lose people. I am specifically referring to the board of directors. One of the things we wanted was that we have representation from every block. Then it was, how do we get each block to police itself? Marilyn came up with wonderful ideas, one of which was "Well, you know, during the middle of the night people get up and they go to their windows and they look out on the street. If they see anything happening—so maybe we should all have phone numbers for people who have cars in the street and if anybody is bothering their car, you

can call them or call the police.” That was very helpful. That was yet another reason why people wanted to stay involved with the process.

Q: You mentioned Forest Avenue Houses. Have similar designations followed in the South Bronx since Longwood?

Bess: No. We’ve got Alexander Avenue, the Longwood Historic District, Forest Avenue Houses, and of course, all of the Bronx now is called the South Bronx. Riverdale was in a class unto itself. It had not been designated. It still is not designated, but a small portion is.

Q: Why do you think that is?

Bess: I don’t know, because they have an absolutely wonderful advocate who lives there with his wife and he raised his family there. Robert—I can’t remember Robert’s last name—it will come to me. He pushed for years to go down to the Commission and argued for designation and finally got a certain area designated, but all of Riverdale is not designated. I don’t know what the reason is.

Q: Were there some historic buildings that you fought for but lost to development in the Bronx?

Bess: In the Bronx or in Longwood?

Q: I recall you mentioning some buildings, maybe some theaters even, around Longwood—but some of them may even have been around Harlem. This would have been in 1990.

Bess: I don't recall. You know, we lost all of our movie theaters. They all went. We lost all of our nightclubs. They went. Movie theaters were big back when I was growing up and there are none there now. I don't remember that too much.

Q: How is Longwood doing today?

Bess: I suspect Longwood is doing all right. There is no association. That has disbanded, because no one wanted to put in the effort that it took. I, of course, went to every meeting and then once the Historic Districts Council was formed, I joined that. I remained a board member on the Historic Districts Council for—ever *[laughs]*. Nobody else wanted to get involved at that level that I was involved around the city. As I said, I would go to the city council and I would give a speech on why certain buildings should be kept in the city. But there is no advocate for Longwood right now, which I find sad.

It hasn't created any problems, but I've seen some buildings come down. One of the other things we did when we were up and running was we got funding and—Longwood has very long streets. The streets on Longwood Avenue—those buildings were in bad repair and they were not designated. So what we did was, we got an architect, some engineers and we put up new housing that complimented the brownstones. People are still living in them. There have been problems, but none of the houses are empty.

Q: You mentioned that some of the houses have come down. Are these the historic ones?

Bess: No, no, no, no. We would have not allowed that, and Longwood would not have allowed that. Maybe there was one or something—I don't know. As best I recall, we did not lose any buildings and I remember one of the arguments that we used was when we got designated, there were seven or six abandoned buildings in the district. They have since been bought and fixed up and sold, so that's a positive. We had very few blank pieces of property. Whether it's still that way, I don't know, because I don't get a chance to go up there that much.

Q: You mentioned that the association disbanded. What year or around what time would that have been?

Bess: I left in 1989, 1990. I would say around 1995. I could be wrong, but I think that's a good date, a good year that it did fold. A lot of the original board members died. These were people who had lived up there forever. Like my family, who had been there since 1944. Marilyn's family had been there. Thankfully she's not dead, but she's still a young woman, I think. Many of the board members who could appreciate the value of that, they died.

Q: Now, around the time that you began to work with HDC [Historic Districts Council] or you served as their board member, were you still living in Longwood?

Bess: I was living there. We still had our Board of Directors, and I was the Chair. Marilyn had resigned, and I stayed on as the Chair. That was when we had put together the HDC. Then my commitment with HDC became intense *[laughs]* and I resigned as chairman and had someone replace me and I stayed on the board. There were just so many projects we had going on. But, yes. I stayed involved with Longwood still after I was on HDC.

Q: Do you live in Longwood still?

Bess: Oh my dear God, no. I moved in 1990-something. 1991. I was asked by the then Senator David Paterson to form a preservation organization and presence in Harlem. I took a leave of absence from my job. I worked—I was a court reporter when I worked. I took a leave of absence and I put together a preservation organization in Harlem and got funding and we did very well. Then that fell apart. But I moved out of Longwood, I guess 1989, 1990. I moved to Greenwich Village for three years, because I bought a wonderful condominium in Battery Park City and that's where I lived for the next fifteen years.

Q: What challenges do you foresee for Longwood in the next decade?

Bess: I don't know if I can answer that competently. It's surviving. It's not organized, and the original board members have disbanded. As I said, many of them have died. But the neighborhood still looks good.

Q: To your knowledge, has gentrification touched Longwood?

Bess: Yes, it's now more Hispanic than anything else. They take pride in the neighborhood, too. They want a safe home.

Q: Are you currently working on any preservation or revitalization projects?

Bess: No. I am not. First of all, I have gotten old [laughs]. I don't have the energy to run around like I used to. I now live in New Jersey. I no longer live in the city, but I'm in the city all the time. I'm involved in so many other things in my life that I just am not that active in preservation anymore. I mean, when I come to the city, I have to park. This was a gift, getting this spot right now. You know, trying to park—it's the whole thing. Although HDC is in a wonderful area on Second Avenue and 11th Street. But, the answer is no, I'm not involved anymore. I think I'm one of the few who got away.

Q: What I found interesting is that given the big success story that is Longwood, there hasn't really—or at least I don't know—anything been published just about Longwood apart from its context within the South Bronx.

Bess: *The New York Times*. David Dunlap did a wonderful article, a very big article years ago, in the 1980s on Longwood, with pictures. For about six months after the article came out in the paper—and I think it may have been in the Sunday edition—we got letters at the office from people as far away as Alaska, Washington State. He had pictures of different sections and areas of the historic district. I remember one letter came with a picture of the article and this woman

said, “I was born right where that window is.” That was wonderful. But other publicity, yes. I became very active with the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington. Richard Moe became the president and he was very interested in what I had done. He was even more interested in what I was doing at that time for Harlem in preservation. Longwood became a name that was known around as a viable, South Bronx historic district.

Q: Did you have any famous visitors? I know Jimmy Carter came—

Bess: Well, not to Longwood. He went up to Crotona Park where Charlotte Street is. With one of the projects that we began working on—I think it may have been the facade and street improvement program, but I’m not too sure—Mayor Koch came. We had wonderful newspaper coverage of his visit with pictures. He spoke about the benefits of the historic district there. Famous people—Colin Powell was not in the district. He was across the street on Margaret Avenue, on Kelly Street. Off the top of my head, I can’t think of anyone else.

Q: Longwood is often credited with really revitalizing the city’s faith in the South Bronx.

Bess: Yes. It was the oasis.

Q: How do you think preservation can serve as a tool for struggling communities today?

Bess: It will help to stabilize the area. It will help to foster a sense of community among the residents and owners. It will certainly raise property value.

Q: That's an interesting thing because—I think, given the way things are today some people would say “Well, if it's raising property value, then it's attracting gentrifiers and in some senses, pushing people out of the neighborhood.”

Bess: Well, what's wrong with gentrifiers? See, that has never been—like what's happening in Harlem right now? I think it's wonderful. I don't see anything wrong with it. There are services now—you can pay for your groceries by check in stores and they deliver, and I think it's a wonderful balance. I don't have a problem with it. I know there are people who do, but I don't. I support it.

Q: I think that's all. It's such a wonderful story.

Bess: We did it?

Q: Yes. If you have any remarks you want to make about Longwood.

Bess: No, I think we covered it, pretty much. Homes are now going for well over \$500,000. Those \$19,000 homes *[laughs]*.

Q: Yes.

Bess: The thing, of course is, the economy ruins a lot of things when it goes down because the Landmarks Preservation Commission's staff is, I'm sure, reduced. They don't have the manpower to go up and do the research that needs to be done. That's difficult for areas. If there are any violations in the community, in the historic districts—they don't have a staff that goes up and sites people for things. I think they used to, but I don't even know if they still have anyone. That contributes to part of the breakdown and the infrastructure.

Q: I was speaking with Tony [Anthony C.] Wood and he says that traditionally, when there's a downturn in the economy, that's good for preservation because neighborhoods are not as threatened by developers.

Bess: Well, let me just say this to you. I respect Tony more than anyone in the city of New York. I think he has such a wonderful insight, and of course he has that wonderful book he wrote called *Preserving New York*. If he thinks that, then I'll go along with him. He's a good friend.

Q: It's often said that the price of preservation is constant vigilance.

Bess: That's an interesting statement, because I said earlier that Longwood has survived. We haven't lost any buildings. I think my ghost is still up at the community planning board, so they're afraid. One of the things that can destroy a historic district is you stabilize that community by designating it and because it's stabilized and it's a nice place to be, city and state agencies want to bring people in there. They'll buy the houses and go in with—I know of two in Longwood where it happened—mental health. They bring in people who are emotionally

challenged and mentally challenged and they need a place to stay. They want a nice environment for them. So they come in.

I think that balance is not good. But, in retrospect, it hasn't bothered the community at all. What they do is they go in, however, and they'll tear out kitchens and bathrooms and put whatever they want in there. Then that makes it difficult for the owner if she or he wants to sell it later. Then they have to restore it and that's—I remember in Harlem, the Mount Morris Historic District—they put in a penal institution in the most beautiful area of that district, of Mount Morris. I thought that was horrible and there's still something there—and they tore down buildings. I think the worst offenders are the city and state.

Q: This has happened in Longwood?

Bess: No. The reason I went there—Marilyn and I both would go up to the community planning board whenever there was a request to convert some of these houses. We would just blast them and say, “No, not in my neighborhood.” The balance was too fragile and it was working, so why tip the scales in the wrong direction? Now, we lost some of those. We had different agencies go in, I think three or four. But they conformed.

Q: Did they actually purchase the houses and move into them?

Bess: Yes, yes, yes—and take their clients in, who lived there. Then our biggest fight was we had this awful hospital right in the midst of Longwood, Prospect Hospital. It was deserted. It was

sold to a group who needed to house transient workers or families—transient families. We were very afraid, because people like to hang out in the street and we didn't want that. Longwood wasn't like that. Well they brought in a wonderful guy who was the executive director who worked with and we never had a problem. Do they have problems now? I don't know, but we didn't then. That original executive director is no longer there. But I think that Longwood is still nice. Marilyn still lives there in her house and I've never heard her complaining about anything.

Q: Do you see yourself returning to Longwood at all?

Bess: No *[laughs]*. No.

Q: Well, thank you so much for your time.

Bess: You're more than welcome. I enjoyed it. It was a good trip back down memory lane.

[END OF INTERVIEW]