

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Margot Gayle

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Margot Gayle conducted by Interviewer Anthony C. Wood on April 26th, 1984. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive Projects' collection of individual oral histories.

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.

In this 1984 interview conducted by NYPAP founder Anthony C. Wood, longtime preservationist Margot Gayle details her role in several preservation campaigns. A political activist and Greenwich Village resident, Gayle was a key organizer in the campaigns to restart the clock on the Jefferson Market Courthouse and save the building for reuse as a library, which helped set the stage for the passage of the landmarks law in 1965. Gayle went on to found the Victorian Society of America and the Friends of Cast Iron Architecture, which successfully advocated for the designation of a historic district in Soho. She also became involved in advocacy for other public clocks throughout the city.

Transcriptionist: Unknown

Session: 1

Interviewee: Margot Gayle

Location: Unknown

Interviewer: Anthony C. Wood

Date: April 26, 1984

Q: What I want to do is: I talk to people and then I type up a transcript of what was said, which I then send back to you.

Gayle: I see, so I can edit a little bit.

Q: Yes, you can edit out or make a point. If I got you off the topic before you make the point that you wanted to make we put it in. Ultimately, it will be a typed transcript with some footnotes annotations from me explaining any references we make that someone might not understand. We're starting a collection of these at the society.

Gayle: I see. That's nice.

Q: After my grant runs out, we can get the society to continue it. Someday I want to publish some of this information. But it's more important to collect the information. So someday if someone wants to seriously sit down and write a book about all these events, they will have more information on it.

Gayle: Yeah, get them while you can. Yeah, you know who's trying to do that too? It's Charles [B.] Hosmer [Jr.].

Q: Yes. Yes.

Gayle: Well, he's trying to collect stuff. Either for another book or to have, I don't know what for.

Q: Did you talk to him when he came through last time? Cause his last book—well books—were well fascinating.

Gayle: Yes.

Q: I was so happy when I discovered him in graduate school. That somebody had actually taken the trouble to create a—write down the history.

Gayle: I wanted to tell you I had a funny experience with him. You know there's Fred [Frederick] Rath?

Q: Yes.

Gayle: I was at a session up in Cooperstown where Charles Hosmer was the guest speaker and Rath was there. And Charles Hosmer was talking about the founding of the National Trust [for Historic Preservation] and all that Rath participated in. He was giving out facts and Rath, who had lived the story in real life, was differing with him. Hosmer

said he knew because he had looked at the documentation and the printed things and that he was the one who had the facts and the dates right. And the man who'd lived through it—

Q: Didn't.

Gayle: Didn't! Wasn't that funny? So you may find yourself doing the same thing.

Q: Well, I have been involved in some of these things and seeing what gets written down and what happens is sometimes they're both right.

Gayle: Yes.

Q: In a sense, things change. What I think I'm curious about it is how did you first get involved in all this, all of this wonderful craziness?

Gayle: Yeah. Well I can see now, going back in my life, that I really cared about historic buildings, back to the time when I got married. My husband and I went on our honeymoon, down to Savannah, when he wanted to go down to the beach and I want to go look at the old houses. That almost caused a riff right there, and so we did both, naturally. But I didn't know anything about the basis for my interest. It was just kind of compelling to me. I didn't do anything more about that. And of course, a place like Atlanta doesn't have much opportunity for historic preservation because it was burned, if

you recall. Then the commercial expansion has wiped out all the old mansions on Peachtree Street and that kind of thing. One of the few historic buildings they had was The Wren's Nest, which was the home of the man who invented Uncle Remus stories.

Q: Right, right.

Gayle: Joel Chandler Harris. I went out there and I happened to arrive the same time as a black woman and her child came and the black woman was turned away. Turned away. And yet the stories were all about Brer Rabbit and all of those black children.

Q: When was that? I hope it was a long time ago.

Gayle: It was quite a while ago. But it made me so irate. I remember taking it on as kind of a cause for a while—that everybody should be able to come to these historic buildings. But that's water way over the dam. It's just that my interest in different forms goes back a lot. My training and schooling and all was in such a different line that it surprises me. I got a master's in bacteriology and I was hoping I might get into medical school. But there weren't women in the southern medical schools. My husband tried to help me get in at Emory University, and I got turned down. It was only after, during World War II, when we came up here and he went on overseas and I worked as a staff writer for CBS that I began to write about New York and stuff going on around New York, and places to go and see. And that led to me really follow this bent of old buildings and historic structures.

Q: When did you move to New York?

Gayle: Nineteen forty-four. I found that in writing as a daily show for someone else to perform, I was always looking into these old buildings and writing them into the script *[laughing]* isn't that funny? It seems almost like subterfuge now, that I was sneaking them in. Because I was also writing interviews for celebrities, celebrities would come into the show and use my written interviews. But I was always sneaking in these old buildings. And the reviewing of new Broadway shows.

Q: Were you living in the [Greenwich] Village at the time?

Gayle: Yeah, I was. And I lived in the Village for thirty years. Until about five years ago. That's a good place to be interested in historic architecture.

Q: Sure, sure.

Gayle: My first real involvement was the Jefferson Market Courthouse.

Q: Is that also the first emphasis in the Village on preservation? Or what were other things going on in the village before you really got involved in it?

Gayle: Not in my knowledge. But I think if I were to talk to some of the preservation committee members at the Municipal Art [Society] we would find that there were things

afoot that weren't all that apparent. Do you remember they built—they took down Rhinelanders Houses on the north side of Washington Square. When they put up new apartment house, they bowed to the surrounding scale by setting it back at the same height as the buildings on the other side of the square. There were other things afoot that we haven't really—and I wasn't involved in. I'll tell you what was afoot. Mary Nichols. Do you know Mary Perot Nichols? She is now the head of WNYC. Mary and others fought [Robert] Moses to standstill about cutting Fifth Avenue as a deep cut.

Q: Oh, into the park?

Gayle: A depressed cut through Washington Square and connecting it with what's now LaGuardia place.

Q: I heard about that fight.

Gayle: Yeah, and that was a great thing. But it's just lost in the past. We should resurrect it and include it.

Q: He was not stopped very often. So it's like a major win.

Gayle: No, no. But you see what it was, was a very good example of how you can rally the Village. It's a very rally-able place because people are educated and cultured and they feel their oats, that they can speak for the public and not let officials—

Q: Speaking of rallying people, you've always struck me as being so attuned to the tools to rally people.

Gayle: Yes. Yes.

Q: I mean getting the postcards off and those things.

Gayle: Oh yes, right.

Q: Were you ever involved with politics? I mean how—

Gayle: I was in politics. It is a very political approach, isn't it? I was very active in the Democratic Party in New York County, which is to say Manhattan, for almost ten years. And that started with [Harry S.] Truman, right there, and then strongly through the [Adlai] Stevenson [II] period. And there was a group that called themselves the Reform Democrats. We organized and actually defeated, in primary battles of the lowest political scale, which is the county committees and the local party districts. A lot of tired, old politicians who had gotten into grooves of non-service and non-interest, and self-service and we succeeded in defeating them. One of the persons who did that was Ed [Edward I.] Koch. He was a district leader. Another was a guy who was named Millard Madone [*phonetic*]. He became a surrogate of New York county. He became a judge as a lawyer. He and I were co-leaders and we did it in our area, which was Chelsea, Gramercy Park.

This was going on primarily in Manhattan, all over. And I think we were all rather stuffy about it. We were the nice guys and they were the—but you always have to make it black and white to get it through to the voters and get them to get out and cast that vote on primary day.

Q: Because those are political tools I noticed, like the post cards you send out and get people to send out. It seems maybe that's where you moved it.

Gayle: Well, what I felt, Tony [Anthony C. Wood] was, that—I encourage you and anyone—get into real politics. And then have your point of view expressed where the decisions are being made that are political and administrative in connection with government. If you're in there rather than taking potshots, but actually part of the decision making, you can do an awful lot for preservation. Am I talking too loud?

Q: No, I think it's going fine. It looks great. I think we're fine. I can also fix my wonderful equipment. I can make it louder, softer. So not to worry.

Gayle: I think that I had an edge because of my political activity. I had come to know almost everybody at the time on the [New York] City Council, the different major officials, from Mayor [Robert F.] Wagner on down.

Q: This helped you when you got involved in preservation in the Village.

Gayle: Preservation of the Jefferson Market Courthouse, you see a lot of it hinged on my being able to lift a phone and talk to somebody on a first name basis and say, what can you do to help? What should I be doing? What is the sequence of things that should be done? And, so, I just think that preservationists should be in politics.

Q: Was it a hard job? I mean today the idea of recycling that building seems so natural, but back then it—?

Gayle: Oh, it was on the brink of destruction. There's no doubt. The city had tried. You know they had changed the court system so it was a redundant courthouse—it was not the only one. And it was the most decorative and in positioned so nicely in the heart of the Greenwich Village area. The city had sincerely tried to find a city use for it. They had circulated all city agencies three times, which I think is required by law, to see if anyone wanted to use that city structure before it was let go. So they wanted to be cavalier about it, selling it off, making a couple bucks off of it. They tried and it stood empty year after year, and it was used occasionally, like it was used by the police academy. The building that they were building for police academy wasn't completed and so they would hold certain classes there. It was an unattractive place to hold it because it was dirty and there were pigeon droppings and pigeons, it's a funny shape inside. Anybody who used it, I think, was a pretty good sport. They probably used it grudgingly because they couldn't probably find something better and cheaper.

Let's see who else used it—oh, the US [United States] Census [Bureau] utilized it, they ran the census, for at least part of the city, out of that building. Then there were some other temporary uses. It just wasn't an appropriate structure, it didn't fit the needs of any city agency, and everybody wanted a new fresh nice building. And even the library did not want it, did you know that? The library which occupied a small, neat looking building as you know on—it's a square somewhere left of Seventh Avenue. Is it Abingdon [Square Park]?

Q: It could be Abingdon Park?

Gayle: Well, there is a square over there, and there was a long-time, Village branch of the public library and it was designed by Richard Morris Hunt, I think. It was just inadequate as far as size went. They had been asking the city to give them capital budget funds for a new library in Greenwich Village. They city came on and said “Well the community wants a new library, you want a new library, they're pushing us to find a new use for the building.” They liked very much the idea of a library. And so we had formed a committee to bring attention to the problem of the building and called it the Committee for the Clock on Jefferson Market Courthouse [The Committee of Neighbors to Get the Clock on Jefferson Market Courthouse Started].

Meanwhile, trying to figure out what to do because we had gotten the building saved, so we start a second committee called the Committee for a Library in the Jefferson Market Courthouse. I was chairman of the first one in connection with the clock. I was co-

chairman with a man named Harold Burns [*phonetic*], who became a judge. He was a city official so he had some know-how but he didn't want to work at it. He said he would advise—

Q: Provide his name.

Gayle: You see, you should realize and I would like to have it on the tape. Women would say [*unclear*] let's form a committee. You—to the guy—you be the head, I'll do all the work, but we need a man up front there of a status to do this. And I'm sure it was a way to make things work actually. And women didn't know how to take the front position anyways. So that committee, Harold Burns and I were co-chairs. When I formed another committee for the library, I said to Wittenberg—what's his first name? Ruth Wittenberg's husband?

Q: Oh, Phillip?

Gayle: Yeah. Phillip Wittenberg. “You be chairman and I'll be deputy chairman.” That was the terminology. Again we said that I'll do the work—and by that time Ruth was in it, and Ruth would help me—and Phillip you be the big shot and make the speeches. He didn't do very much but what he did helped out a great deal, there's no doubt about it. Ruth pitched in, it was her first experience. She helped me. Now later on, she—well she's been in the picture all along. It's a slightly fuzzy thing that I'm not going to talk about. But Ruth certainly worked hard. Later, I will say this, later they kind of pushed me aside, she and Phil.

I remember Bob [Robert] Low, who was a councilman, when we stated that the city had agreed to make the building into a library. Phil didn't even ask me to be on the platform. And Bob Low was horrified—"What were they doing?" So you can see how it's fuzzy area in there. But the outcome was that Mayor Wagner, who does not get enough credit for saving that building, he said to the library, "You can't have capital budget funds to have a library unless you will use it to restore this structure and occupy it as the library." But they said, we don't want to, we want the site which is perfect, that we want a new plate-glass library there. So no everybody you think might be preservation is for preservation.

Q: So Wagner actually—did he then force the library to—

Gayle: He did. He said take it or leave it. If you don't want your library there, then you can't have the funds in the capital budget this year.

Q: Do you think that he did this because he was educated about preservation or do you think he has a sincere—

Gayle: No. There are people like me, kind of around, who were helping him to understand. But remember, he was the man that came up with the [New York City] Landmarks Law.

Q: That's right, so it wasn't Low, the councilman—

Gayle: Listen Tony. While we're on the subject, I think, that if not this year, certainly next year, Wagner ought to receive an award from us, for helping—*[crosstalk]*.

Q: That's a wonderful idea, because next year is the twentieth anniversary of the law. And there's a big hoopla that we're talking about right now. In the planning stages, I'll make a note of that myself.

Gayle: Write that down. He is the natural one to be rediscovered. He's such a quiet, modest guy and so on.

Q: Rediscovered as the quiet political champion.

Gayle: He left office pretty quick and it seemed to be [John V.] Lindsay's work but it was actually Wagner's.

Q: Since he was involved with the law, were you involved in the whole fight to get the law created?

Gayle: Yeah, but you know, not so very much. It was mostly the Squire Society *[phonetic]* and some other. You probably have archives on that.

Q: We do have some archives, but they're not what they should be.

Gayle: Somebody could do some newspaper research on it. Maybe you could get somebody to write a master's thesis.

Q: Good idea. I'm going to be talking to Geoffrey Platt, and I think he was a good figure to pull a lot of things together.

Gayle: Sure. He's probably the best one. Where does he live now?

Q: I think he lives in Connecticut, but he comes in to his firm.

Gayle: I see. I would get a hold of Geoffrey as fast as I could. People disappear off the scene, now that we've seen Allan disappear. I don't expect we'd ever think that we wouldn't have Allan next year to consult on this. Astis [*phonetic*] is dead, isn't he? Walt Astis?

Q: I don't know. I don't know him.

Gayle: Oh, he was the chairman of your committee.

Q: Was he?

Gayle: Well, I'll tell you Dan [Daniel] Hopping could help you on it. Oh, maybe we should create a committee set up for marking the twentieth anniversary of the law. Put me on the committee and we'll work towards having Bob Wagner made a hero.

Q: Out of this project, I've been thinking about the history of course because I have been reading all of the clippings. And it struck me that the twentieth anniversary is coming up and no one had said anything about it, so I spoke to Gene Norman, and I talked to Kent [Barwick], and I talked to Laurie Beckelman, and we now have an informal working group with the commission, the Conservancy, the Municipal Art Society, and the Historic Districts Council, because I want that group to get going again. We're talking about how can we have some hoopla to get some good press and get some substantive things out of it. The good news is we're thinking and we have a little time, but this is great to add to it.

Gayle: Is that right?

Q: Well the whole Village—that Jefferson Market episode helped the Village to coalesce for the designation of the Village—

Gayle: I do think that it helped a lot, but what we did affect more immediately, was the passage of the law. We got a lot of publicity on the Jefferson Market Courthouse. If you look back through the press—I don't know what I did with all my clippings when I moved; I may have given them to the library. They may have a bunch of stuff stashed there and Ruth may have kept stuff. If you read between the lines, you can see that I find

it hard to communicate with Ruth. But that doesn't mean that she isn't a resource in all this history. Ruth is not a well woman. Someone should try do—you should do this with her. But I think that we really paved the way, along with Penn Station—I think that came a little later—we started—do you want to put down a couple dates?

Q: Yeah, sure.

Gayle: They're going on the tape. We started the Committee to Save the Clock, which was the beginning.

Q: The first of the whole thing.

Gayle: Right. At a Christmas cocktail party in December 1959.

Q: That early? Wow.

Gayle: Yes, 1959. It was right at the end of the 1950s. That's where Harold Burns and I, turned to some of our neighbors who were at this cocktail party, at a lawyers house whose name is Bob [Robert S.] Ratner—Bob and Elinor [F.] Ratner's house on lower Fifth Avenue. We said, "Let's do something about the building. It looks so dead with the clock standing still for almost two years. Why don't we get the clock going first while we try to figure out what to do with that building to save it." We sent a wire to Mayor Wagner, the idea was—what I was trying to was like what I want for Christmas is my

two front teeth. What we want for Christmas in the Village is to get our clock started on the old Jefferson Courthouse. We sent him a wire and he communicated back some way. And we let this out to the press that we were forming a little committee to try to get the clock going. Then we got the Church of the Ascension minister to say, “Well we’ll make a contribution if you get a committee going.” I was connected to that church during the time. We started collecting money to have the clock work done. That was the first stirrings. Then as we went into 1960, our committee began to take shape, *The Villager* ran a coupon in the newspaper, asking people to send in a dollar bill with the coupon. I just love to raise money by doing little things like that.

Q: Oh yeah.

Gayle: Because it means participation. So, we had an awful lot of people in a couple months that had a stake in that clock because they had kicked in a dollar and mailed it. Of course it was really nice to have a local paper that would do that. Into 1961 we were collecting dollars, we had someone survey the clock and see what it needed. It was a big thing up there, the faces are six feet across. The old works were really so worn it turned out, that we got a man to go up there—he was an antique dealer—every week and wind the clock. Twenty minutes pulling up the weights.

Q: Oh wow.

Gayle: The chains that went down into the tall tower, he would wind them up. And then a
brinkman, is that what you call them?

Q: Yes, I think so.

Gayle: Then he would drop that and then move all hands on the clocks. All four faces at
once. We were so far in over our depth; I didn't even know how a clock worked
[laughing]. We found that we had to electrify the clock, and this guy who had done the
business of winding it up all the time was so relieved.

Q: I can imagine.

Gayle: But we then moved on to raise around four thousand dollars, and we had the
works replaced with the electrified works. And we also had all four faces replaced
because they were heavy glass and one of them had a big crack in it. We were scared to
death that it would fall on somebody. Now I think we have in there plastic face. I'm not
very satisfied with the way things are lighted. It's so dim; we should keep it nice and
bright. It amused me, always and it still does, to think that to work on city property we
had to take out insurance, liability insurance, and we had to take responsibility for that
tower, which is built quite separately from the building. You can't get into it from the
building, you have to get into it through the Tenth Street side through a little door and go
up a little medieval stone staircase.

Q: I've never been there. That sounds wonderful.

Gayle: Oh, yeah. You'd love it. But we rented, we leased from the city that tower for \$1 a month. We controlled that great big brick tower even though we paid \$1 a month in rent. And then we were permitted to work on the city property that we had leased. Don't you think that's interesting.

Q: It is, That gave you a foothold into the whole issue.

Gayle: Yeah, and it means that the city was working with us. They were cooperating. They figured out a way for us to work on the building while we tried to find—

Q: Were they genuinely interested?

Gayle: Well, we got people interested. It was such a *[unclear]*, offbeat kind of thing, they just got a big laugh out of it. And there were so many problems with the building anyways. The roof leaked, the pigeons were inside. You'd go and find there were dead pigeons because they'd gone in and flown around and couldn't get out. Poor building. There was no reason to keep it up, so it just kind of drifted downhill. It gives me such a big laugh to think that—you see that tower, that we rented that tower.

That tower was there because it had been a fire lookout tower. There used to be one up in Harlem. This was a fire lookout tower. There used to be one at the old Jefferson Market,

a wooden one. When they tore down the old market to build the new brick market and the courthouse, and the little bitty jail, they were required by the city to build a fire lookout tower. That's how there comes to be a tower there. That's also why it's separate because it belong to the fire agency, whatever it was called at that time. The rest of the building belonged to the court system. That's why you couldn't enter the building from the—isn't that interesting? No one's really spelled it out, written it out.

Q: Well you should.

Gayle: So what? Write it out and then file it in a folder?

Q: No, no, no, no.

Gayle: Well I have a lot of ideas that are worth writing about, but if they're not going to be published I'll be damned if I'd write it.

Q: No that's—

Gayle: Do all that work.

Q: Just beat your head against the wall.

Gayle: But it's just a funny story. However, I think that saving that building in the '60s—
now when was Penn Station?

Q: 1963 I think it started to comedown. I think they—

Gayle: When did the architects picket it?

Q: Somewhere very early that year.

Gayle: So '63 and we were going in '60 and '61. We have two events here that quite
reached the city public and got them to where they would beg for a Landmarks Law, or
wanted it.

Q: Well, it's very interesting also in Wagner's mind, because when you read, you hear
the story—the few things I've read on the process of the law, what got going because of
James Felt. He was the [New York] City Planning Commission chairman. He had been
talking to people at the Municipal Art Society and everyone had this concern, and they
sent a letter to the mayor, Wagner, who was very—

Gayle: Who is they?

Q: They, meaning Felt, with the Municipal Art Society. He gave an address at the
Municipal Art Society and the topic was on landmarks. Then everyone sat down and just

thought we were all in the same place in our minds. Felt was the one who had to move it.

Gayle: Isn't that marvelous that he did? He was a developer and a real estate man.

Q: Yeah, but the fact was that Wagner was already attuned to it though the Village experience.

Gayle: Oh yeah, I hadn't thought of that, the value of that. You know, I used to see Wagner in a lot of political situations. He got to where he would say "Margot, don't mention the Jefferson Market Library." I was working for the city by that time, thanks to my political activity by then, I was in line if I wanted a job. I wanted a job, and I was given a nice job doing public relations for the department of public events. It was interesting. I did the publicity for the ticker tape parades and a lot of interesting things. At these events the mayor would be the top honcho. I would have the opportunity to be very close to him and see him, and he would say to me "Margot, no more about the Jefferson Market Courthouse, we're doing the best we can." There must be other people around who would mention it too from time to time. Anyways, he certainly was sensitized to it. He was of a mind, as his son has been too, to want to do some long-range, good things for the city, don't you?

Q: Oh, yeah. I think that his record—the time to rediscover the Wagner legacy is upon us.

Gayle: He was so modest, even at the time. He didn't go around meeting his press. He didn't go around, you know, going "How am I doing?" Like Ed Koch and all that.

Q: Right, right. Well in the Village, saving the clock got people interested in the building, which was then the big hook.

Gayle: That was the whole idea of the clock bit. I have found that people are really interested in public clocks.

Q: That's true. I've noticed.

Gayle: I've been involved in three or four as a matter of fact.

Q: The Sun Clock, right?

Gayle: The Sun Clock and there was a clock in St. Peter's Church over in Chelsea. I remember writing something into the CBS show about it. People sent dollars over there.

Q: Oh to CBS? [*Laughing*].

So that Village fight on the market was really your first splash into preservation in an activist way. And then what was—?

Gayle: It took over my life. Oh yeah, and it nearly ruined my marriage. Let me tell you. It was all run out of my front room, and the constant phoning. Between two teenage girls and this, my husband nearly went crazy with the phone calls. He was not an activist kind of guy. He was quite an academic, he wanted to spend an evening quietly at home reading. I was out at a meeting and the phone was be ringing.

Q: Oh, boy *[laughs]*.

Gayle: I think there are women like me who are effective and enjoy what they do, but it takes a toll on their families.

Q: Well it takes such a demand on your time.

So that fight, then what about the designation fight for the Village itself?

Gayle: I wasn't into that so much. I think Ruth probably was.

.

Q: Looking back, what was the next battle on the horizon?

Gayle: Well I don't know if they were battles, but I'll tell you, I took a position after that whole Jefferson Market thing had come out successfully. We had capital budget funds, and the building had not been auctioned because it was due to be auctioned off, and an apartment house was to be built on the site. The West Side Savings Bank there, which is

now Emigrant [Savings] Bank, had a proposal presented at a dinner to announce it at the Fifth Avenue hotel. And they were very far along with this. The fact that our Clock Committee had this guy Harold Burns, who was that time Housing [New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development] commissioner, and then later became a judge. He helped stave off the auction. It was such brinksmanship. I just marvel that the building just didn't quite slip away. And we'd save it after it was *[unclear]* destroyed.

We had the help of the borough president, Ed [Edward R.] Dudley. I don't know if you remember Ed Dudley's name. He was the black man who is now a judge in some court. He helped us. The point I wanted to make was that I felt that last minute, these grandstand kind of things were not the way to handle preservation. I'll just let that phone ring, it's the Victorian *[unclear]*. You had to look ahead and plan and identify what needed saving and work toward it in an orderly way. Just what we're doing to this iron front bores the hell out of me, really. And this thing that Selma Rattner tried to do with the building down in Union Square. It's just too little too late and people just knock themselves out. If they're lucky they may succeed, but wasn't worth all that human trauma. We should be as businesslike about saving historical structures as we are about other things. So, I said to myself that I would never again be a main figure in a last minute brinksmanship kind of thing. It's a deep conviction I have now. And I think we're all much better about it.

Q: I think we are.

Gayle: And the [New York City] Landmarks [Preservation] Commission does identify and give priorities, the way it should be done. Then we were such amateurs. We ran on emotion and excitement.

Q: It seems to have been necessary at that time, though.

Gayle: Maybe so.

Q: Looking back at it—

Gayle: It was the only way we could have saved that building. And saving that building was key to the later Landmark's Law, which now makes it possible for us to be more orderly.

Q: True.

Gayle: But then you see what I did—instead of going from one fight to the other which didn't really interest me that much—was to organize and help the Victorian Society. We organized the Victorian Society to emphasize Nineteenth Century buildings here.

Q: I heard that the American branch was formed over your kitchen table.

Gayle: It was. That's all true. Bandon always says that it was formed in Margot Gayle's kitchen. But the truth is that we did run it out of my apartment.

Q: When was this? When did the American branch—?

Gayle: Nineteen Sixty-Six. Some of us were in England, attending Attingham Park Summer School. At that summer school, Sir Nikolaus [B.L.] Pevsner took us aside and told us that he decided—[unclear] we had a drink—that we should form a branch of the Victorian Society in the United States. They had had theirs going for about ten years in England to stop the destruction of Victorian buildings. He said that we should start one in America because there, if you don't save your Nineteenth Century buildings, you don't have so much. You don't have roman ruins and you don't have gothic cathedrals. I remember this so clearly. He tried to inspire us to start, there were four or five of us. When we got back, we kept running into each other at events, and we would say, "Are you going to start a Victorian society?" We were all scared because it's so much work and it would probably fall flat on its face. Then we got together, this little handful, there were about five of us, and we said, let's try it. This was in June 1966.

Q: So who were the five?

Gayle: The five were [J.] Stewart Johnson, he was then at the Metropolitan Museum [of Art], he's now at the Modern Museum [Museum of Modern Art]. There was Caroline Karpinski who was at the Metropolitan Museum, I don't know where she is now,

Washington, I think. Amaro Gail [*phonetic*], who was then working with the City Planning Commission, public relations. And a girl named Clara Meyer [*phonetic*] who was working at the Cooper Union [for the Advancement of Science and Art] and was a specialist in textiles. I know I'm leaving out somebody. There were four or five of us. We got together and we decided we would take the plunge and form a branch Victorian Society and we did.

We said that maybe we'd have twenty-five or thirty members but my god it took off like wildfire. It was just an idea whose time had come and nearly drove us crazy, just as a group of volunteers. We ran this thing out of my apartment working weekends.

Answering correspondence to City Planning. We had a meeting every month with a lecture, urging people to join and trying to put up little exhibits. I remember at the National Trust I did a homemade exhibit and ran a little table at the National Trust in Philadelphia—the annual meeting. Everything was so homemade but we did get the Victorian Society started.

Later on March 18, 1970, I founded another group, kind of on the same premise. Like plan ahead, work ahead. And that was the Friends of Cast Iron Architecture.

Q: And that group, was planned in your mind, to be in place to do Soho? You saw that as a step?

Gayle: I wasn't thinking quite so specifically. But I said that these buildings are being mindlessly destroyed because people don't recognize them or have any interest in them. If we had an organization dedicated specifically to that, we could then go on to identify and interest people, and lead hopefully to preservation. You can't ever save it again. After all you're not dealing with any money, you're not going to go out and buy the iron buildings to save them. You just have to take the step, which makes the people who might own the buildings to not let them get away or the governmental bodies that might protect them. That was a logical way of getting the Soho district. We sure helped a lot.

Q: Tell me about that.

Gayle: I hadn't thought about that for a time. Should I be specific?

Q: Yes.

Gayle: Well it doesn't—anyway, the Landmarks Commission had decided that they would designate some part of Soho. They came up with a suggestion, particularly the chairman at that time, that they designate two streets, Greene Street and Broome Street.

Q: Who was chairman at the time?

Gayle: Harmon [H.] Goldstone. We wanted the whole area, and they talking about two streets. You cannot designate anything unless you have it heard publicly, you know this.

And there was this staff member named Michael Gold [*phonetic*—have you ever heard of Mike Gold? He went on to Richmond, Virginia later. Mike said, well I don't know what he said but let us say it was apparent that the chairman wanted this kind of minimal kind of designation, and there was a lot of interest in seeing what is now the district, twenty-six square blocks designated. He said, let's hear it anyway. Let's hear it, then we can designate whatever part of it. He took the key step, wouldn't matter how much we had agitated. Later, if it hadn't been heard, they couldn't designate it. And Harmon might not have agreed to hear it later.

For the hearing they gave it those boundaries, from Canal [Street] to Houston [Street], Crosby [Street] to West Broadway. The hearing was held. I'm sure that the idea was for these two streets. Then we put on a campaign in cooperation with the Soho Artists Association and our outfit, Friends of Cast Iron Architecture, with the mayor's office, with the city councilmen, and with any key officials that could say the Landmarks. "Why aren't you doing this? Save the whole twenty-six square blocks."

We had a petition campaign; I think I have an example of what we did. Instead of having a huge petition with hundred of names, we had little individual petitions with each one signed by. We had hundred of them printed, each one to be signed by a person, and sent to Mayor Lindsay. And he kept getting these individual things—I am petitioning you, whatever it said—to do this.

Some of them we would go out to do ourselves. We would have bridge tables down in Soho. We would sit there on a Sunday and get people to sign these things and we would take them back so they wouldn't have to mail them because we knew that they wouldn't mail them. We had a beautiful box. One of our members was very artistic and designed a beautiful patent leather kind of box. We put them in here and took them down to city hall. And they were—this is what I heard, I knew one of the people in city hall—who took them in and put them on the mayor's desk, and he said, what is this beautiful thing? It had a beautiful, glossy, black and white photo of an iron building on the front, and the shiny box. And he opened it and said "Oh, no! These awful petitions!" He'd been inundated by them.

Q: Sounds very effective.

Gayle: There's no doubt that it was very effective. I don't know how it happened, but I can say in my mind, I think John Lindsay must have said to his Landmarks chairman, "What are all these things I'm getting? Why aren't you doing what the people want? What's your problem?" And I can hear Harmon saying, "We can't do all those because we don't have a big enough staff to cope with that, the addition of a big district like that." And I can see John Lindsay saying—I don't know if this happened or not, but something happened. "Well, we'll see that you get more staff, but the people really want this, and I don't see why they shouldn't."

Q: Yeah and stop those petitions!

Gayle: Yes. Stop those petitions [*laughing*]. So the upshot of it was that the larger area was designated. I don't know what went on—ask Geoff Platt. He has some background, inside stuff from Geoffrey. No one would really talk to me at the time because I was a pressure person.

Q: I'll make note of that. Was there any real opposition to it besides the apparent reluctantness on the commission's part?

Gayle: I don't think so. I don't know where it would come from. I would like to be with Geoff when he talks about this. I think that you should make a little something out of Geoffrey Platt too, for the twentieth anniversary.

Q: Yes, because he was so—he was the head of the interim committee, and the commission in those early days.

Gayle: Yeah. Think about the hours that he must have spent in—

Q: The dedication Well, you must have spent billions of hours as well.

Gayle: Yes, I spend an awful lot. And all those other people did too.

Q: Well, what do you think about Soho now? It's changed so much over the years.

Gayle: Well, you could say—you can be sentimental and say, “I liked it the old way.” Which almost everyone says. And yet you cannot stop these processes and you shouldn’t really go around beating your breast, “Why did we let it happen this way?” I just don’t see what we could have done it. It is an attractive area. Those buildings are fixed up are very—and wonderful spaces inside.

Q: They are beautiful.

Gayle: All those lovely iron columns inside that open up the ground floors and other floors. But in the old days they would had to have heavy brick partitions to hold up the walls, but now they have these nice slender columns. That’s what the cast iron did. Here’s what I hope, I think that it’s fine. I hope that it just doesn’t become a passing fancy that is later allowed to degenerate again into some whole slum kind of thing because it isn’t stylish anymore. That happened with Old Town in Chicago.

Old Town was the old Nineteenth Century, but there wasn’t much of that kind of thing left in Chicago. They fixed it up and they kind of had a mini Soho. Then people got tired of it and the drug trade came along, and that thing just went right downhill. We’d hate to see that happen to Soho. I think the fact that it is so central and so well served by transportation, it’s too valuable to give over to the drug dealers and all that stuff. But it’s something that we might want to bear in mind to protect Soho. Not against the artists, but in connection with the people.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: Test. One, two, three.

Gayle: She'll be ringing pretty soon, but let's go ahead. How are we doing?

Q: We're doing fine, we're covering a lot of stuff that I really wanted to hear you talk about. One thing I'm curious about is, how do you think—well you've now seen preservation from the beginnings of New York, some twenty-odd years.

Gayle: But you must remember that it was already going before I was in it. At the Municipal Art Society, you had those listings, going forward.

Q: Right, during the late '50s and I think there were a couple exhibitions that happened. I've stumbled upon that stuff. I've seen the listings in our basement, and boxes of old files, which I'm now reading through from the '50s and '60s.

Gayle: When do you find the time to do that?

Q: Well, it's not easy. Do you think people—have opinions changed publicly at least?

Gayle: I certainly do because now all kinds of men on the street want us to save interesting old buildings. Even taxi drivers say they ought to save this, they shouldn't have—and that's a pretty building, lady did you notice that? Don't you think that's true?

Q: That's true. No, I think so. I'm wondering, has preservation itself changed? I know that it's changed some, but has it changed the right way?

Gayle: I want to tell you something Jim [James Grote] Vanderpool, remember him? Jim was a kind of a specimen-minded, museum-minded kind of preservationist. If you saved one Eighteenth Century building with a gambrel roof, you didn't have to save anymore. I think that we were lucky that he didn't head our commission too long, because we really don't want that point of view, affecting our decisions, that you have to keep one of everything and rest of them can—

Q: So the commission has always, in my mind, gone for the designation purely on the architecture. It's been somewhat weak on things that weren't as pretty, but may have a lot of history.

Gayle: Or that were important in the local environment and enriched an environment. That's what kind of worries me. It's when a community really wants the building—that's the thing that makes it home and makes it their community. I'm thinking of some churches, for instance, in really poor communities. These churches are extremely important to the community and are the only decent handsome thing around, and the

Catholic Church says, “We don’t want it to be a landmark. It isn’t a landmark, it isn’t really wonderful architecture.” Bill [William C.] Shopsin comes in and testifies for the Catholic Church that it really isn’t important architecture. And they say it’s not historic, it’s just been there since 1893 or something like that. The community, they adore that building, and a lot of them are Catholics and go through a lot of their lives there. Our law doesn’t really provide for the environmental approach too much. To me that’s one of the exciting things about trying to save key buildings in more, I guess more often impoverished communities.

Q: Have you ever had any disappointments during your time in preservation?

Gayle: Well, I think we’re about to have one on Beacon Hills [*phonetic*] [*laughing*].

Q: Well, even if you save that one from your living room, it still may be a disappointment.

Gayle: Well you know that real estate and everything’s just so expensive that unless you’re a millionaire and can go and buy it, you have to expect see a lot of them go. We have lost a big iron-front building about a year ago, 142 Pearl [Street]. I guess it’s been a year now, down on Hanover Square. It wasn’t really noticed that much. If you look in my book, it’s the first one pictured in the book. I am sorry that that had to go. But they were on Broadway, on Thomas St., there were what was called the Thomas Twins, an iron building on each corner, identical. Harmon was the chairman at that time, and he, as far

as I could see, did not try to save these twin iron buildings. That seemed really sad to me. Around the corner from where Landmarks was, because they were on Broadway at one time, on I think Reade Street. He let another iron building come down unquestioningly. The Laing Stores were terrible. All that care and money should have gone into saving them and then they were not safeguarded adequately. They could have been safeguarded adequately. That was a really sad thing. And even the second place where they put them was not that good for storage. Did you ever go look at it? I went to go look at it once.

Q: No, was that under the bridge?

Gayle: It was about Fifty-first Street, way west, a little space in between two tenements, that had a wall in front with some kind of cheap door with no padlock, and no roof, as I recall. In other words it was at one time a little alleyway of some sort. Let's say it was closed off at both ends, but you could see down into it. They broke through the padlock. I don't know why there couldn't have been a better place than that. We lost those parts. And Jim [James Marston] Fitch could have had them recast and put up in the [South Street] Seaport. Do you know that story?

Q: No, I haven't heard that.

Gayle: I've got an article that tells the story, I'll give it to you. Much better than telling the story over now. In fact, we're stuffing it in there, we're mailing it out. He wrote it and it appeared in the January issue of *Architectural Record*. I'll give you a few copies

because I think that my printer printed two thousand instead of one thousand. I can't see why we've got so much.

Q: As long as he billed you for one thousand.

Gayle: I know he's going to bill me for the proper amount. It's going to be quite expensive. I always like to have a few. I will give you a handful.

Q: Oh, terrific. I'll put them all in the information exchange.

Gayle: Would you mind if I go check my mail?

Q: Not a problem.

[INTERRUPTION]

Gayle: This is one of our volunteers.

Q: You've been terrific to talk to, but I can see that you have other things to do. But if I could just invite myself back at some other time? To pick your brain.

Gayle: Oh, you're not picking my brain, you're just giving me a chance to put some of it on record.

Q: Yeah, part of this deal is, once we're done you get to see this again. I have all the machinery at home and have all the transcriber stuff.

Gayle: That sounds like a lot of work Tony.

Q: Well, the grants have been great. If I wanted to do this without a grant, then it would be my own little project.

Gayle: Where did you get the grant?

Q: It was a little grant from the Education Facilities Laboratory. It's NYSCA money. New York State Council on the Arts money. They have this policy of giving little grants to individuals for them to pursue their own work. Susan Tunick got one to pursue her terracotta work.

Gayle: Oh, she did? That's so nice.

Q: Yeah, so they're been really valuable and the grants are a lot smaller now, but I got a computer, so I can type this up on a word processor. And I can do it over and over.

Gayle: Did you get that with the grant?

Q: Yeah. The idea is I put most of the grant money in this hardware.

Gayle: Then you do the work. Then I can just keep doing it.

Gayle: Could I do that?

Q: Sure.

Gayle: I'll talk to you about that sometime.

[END OF INTERVIEW]
