INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Lucie Chin

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Lucie Chin conducted by Interviewer Lauren Waller in 2012. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive Project's collection of individual 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.

Lucie Chin was the operations manager at the Wyckoff House Museum at the time of this oral history. She started working with the museum as a volunteer through the St. Nicholas Day event at the museum. From there, she worked with them on various events and became a docent, giving tours of the house to visitors. She speaks about the process of planning for visitor center and how the new structure would allow the museum to expand their public programming. Before the construction of the visitor center their public programs were very weather dependent, and Ms. Chin speaks about the possibilities a modern structure would facilitate. She also shares some history of the area and how it's changed over the years to its current state of a largely Caribbean immigrant community.

Lucie Chin began working at the Wyckoff House Museum in 2001 as a volunteer for their St. Nicolas Day event. She later began giving tours of the house and was the operations managers. She also worked with the Prospect Park Alliance for their annual Haunted Walk, as a Halloween costume and set designer.

Transcriptionist: Jackie Thirthorpe | Session: 1

Interviewee: Lucie Chin | Location: Unknown

Interviewer: Lauren Waller | Date: 2012

Q: How long have you been working at the [Wyckoff House] Museum?

Chin: I started as a volunteer in 2001, and I am not exactly sure what the timing was—it was either late 2004 or early 2005—when they actually began to pay me. I started out just working weekends. We had a very small staff at the time and it was really difficult for them to spread themselves over six days without compromising what needed to be done in the office. I became the weekend docent/manager/whatever and that meant that they could focus their attention on Monday through Friday when the work they really needed to get done had to be accomplished.

Gradually over time, I started picking up extra duties and extra days. I began buying for the gift shop, so that added a few days of the week when I had to be in and be able to interact with the staff. At the time when I first started, we had our office over in Nazareth [Regional] High School, which is about a block from here. It used to be a parochial school and it had the teaching brothers actually lived in. When it ceased to be a Catholic school then all of the priests and the brothers' cells up in the top floor became dormant so they were renting them out to people in the neighborhood as office space. We were over there and it was kind of weird because I was over here and so there was this really kind of disconnect. I think it was 2004—2003/2004—when the trailer came onto the property and became our office. Then it was a lot easier for the staff to be in

one place at one time. Communication became a lot better but I also started picking up extra work because "Oh, now it's easier—"

Q: To delegate tasks.

Chin: Yes, exactly. At this point in time, I'm working mostly five days a week, although occasionally—I've got a second job—and occasionally that one takes over my life. I haven't actually been here since Tuesday—I was at the other job for a while—but it's very flexible in my case. It is sometimes kind of disjointed but the other guys are a lot more regular than I am.

Q: Could you give me a brief description of your duties here in the Museum? What is your role in the Museum?

Chin: Well, primarily I'm the docent. I'm the one who gives the house tours—at least the adult house tours. I don't participate in the education program or any of the things that have to do with the young kids. I also help with public events. I have been doing that from the very beginning. In fact, the first volunteer work I did out here in 2001 was for their St. Nicholas Day event. That's actually how I found them—through their public events and their need for certain kinds of support. I also did historical research, not only in terms of the architecture of the house but just in terms of farm culture for Kings County in general. I, personally, am most interested in what happened in the seventeenth century but this house was a working farm for twenty years and it's been standing for 360 years. Also, as time went on, I got more involved in figuring out the transition of Kings County—the farm culture—into the urban culture. There is quite a bit of

information about that and it is very interesting to look at what is surrounding the house today and see how over the course of time, by stages, it has evolved.

Q: Are you trying to integrate that into your tours?

Chin: Yeah, because you can't ignore it. You're standing out there looking at the house and there is this entire junkyard behind you. Also, we're seven feet below grade and when you look at the pictures from 1900, the environment is totally different. It really can't be ignored and I really think that it shouldn't be ignored. It's part of—part of an old house. It's seen a lot of change over the course of time and I think that is what a lot of our mission and interpretation is really about. It's not just static in time in one particular century.

Q: Well, I will get to those in depth questions in a little but to backtrack a bit—you said that what peaked your interest was the St. Nicholas Day event. What about that, particularly, did you think was interesting?

Chin: Well, at the time I was freelancing, doing events for Prospect Park—I still do—but I had finished the Halloween walk there one year and I went in to turn in my receipts. The lady who was in the special events department said, "By the way, there's this historic site that's doing a St. Nicholas day thing and they need some help and I thought that you might be interested." I said, "Well, sure, here, I'll go out and talk to them." I did and it was less the St. Nicholas event itself that peaked my interest than the house because it's Dutch and I have my best friends in the world—literally the world—in the Netherlands. My goddaughter lives in the Netherlands. I've

been going back and forth for forty years, so it was like oh my gosh this is Dutch—yeah. St. Nicholas is one of their major icons so I helped them out with that—mainly with costuming. That was what they needed at the time.

The other part of my life in those days was the Kings County Shakespeare Company and I had a whole costume array that I could pull from. I started building their costumes for them so that they could own something that they could use over time. Every time they had a public event, I would come out and help out with popcorn or taking tickets or whatever it was. I would always follow Sean around when he did the house tours and for three years there was one event that was particularly overwhelmed and he just didn't have time to do the tour and he said, "You do it." And I said, "What, are you, nuts?" And he said, "No, no, no, you have every word I ever said committed to memory—you're going to do it." That was kind of the beginning of the end. But yeah, it was kind of a back door entry—it wasn't that I found "Oh, this historic house, it needs help." It was sort of like, "Okay, I'll see if I can give them a hand with something," and it was an oh-my moment.

Q: Who have you found visits the Museum the most—who is the audience?

Chin: Well, the people who visit the Museum the most are actually the school kids. We see four to five thousand of those a year in the second grade and they come on class trips just about every morning. We have at least one school group a day. There was a while when we were having more than that but it began to overburden the house so we've now cut back to one a day. They come in the thousands.

As far as walking visitorship is concerned, we are kind of lacking. I mean we'd really, really like to see that aspect of things bump up by a couple orders of magnitude. Our public events pull in quite a number of people and they come in from all over the City and some of them come in from Long Island, depending on what the event is. We can attract large expatriate Dutch population for St. Nicholas Day. For the autumn event—our apple festival—we can have people coming in from Queens and Staten Island. Some of the other events are a lot more local—our Halloween events tends to pull in much more the immediate neighborhood because there are so many events going on that time of year. For that kind of thing, the people tend to stick to their own particular area. So, our demographic is very, very mixed.

But in terms of just general daily house tours, I'd say probably about a third of the people who do walk-in tours are Wyckoff descendants. That doesn't necessarily mean they're members. We have a whole Wyckoff membership base, most of who are spread out all over the country, and I'd say ninety percent of them are never going to set foot in this house. But there are other descendants who are not members and they do tend to come and for them it's sort of like a one-time pilgrimage to see where the family started.

Other than that, we get a lot of people who are interested in architectural history, other people who are just history buffs in general, and old house buffs. We get a few—occasionally we get random bicycle tours that come by and sort of discover it all of a sudden. But nothing really terribly consistent. Outside of public programs that we do, we can go weeks at a time without having a single tour. But then, like last weekend, I had people on all six tours and it was kind of

weird because three of the tours had people who had gone to high school over at Nazareth in the ’70s. They actually remembered the house before it was restored, so that was kind of amazing.

But we get more people from out of town than we do from the local area. Even the people who come in looking for architecture tours and what not tend to be people who are visiting the Northeast. They’ve been to Philadelphia—they want to see some old structures there. They’ve been to Boston—they want to see some old structures there. They’re really interested in that particular aspect of the house. I’ve actually had people that have been doing self-tours. There were a couple of gentlemen, for instance, a couple of years ago who came through who were recreationists and they were interested in the Revolutionary War. What they had decided they were going to do was build their own tour that took them from Gravesend, where the British had landed and offloaded all of the Hessians, and follow the line that they had taken to get to present-day Rockaway Parkway. It had brought them right past the house because they were following Canarsie Lane, which is just behind us. So, things like that will crop up every now and then. They’re really fascinating—I love those because they get so excited when they find something they didn’t know was on the route and I get really happy because they’ve got information I didn’t have.

Q: Who would you say are the biggest stakeholders? Who do you think the Museum is really for? I know you just mentioned there is a vast audience but if you could pick one.

Chin: Hmm. Well, we are still trying to find that out, really. In terms of stakeholders, I would probably say the Wyckoffs, even though they don’t come here because it is their genealogical

association that is the main support of our—you know through their dues and what not—of the Museum's general operating and its education programs. In terms of who it's really for—at this moment in time I would have to say the school groups because they are the largest participants in our functions on all levels. So, it's really kind of a split question as to whether you are talking about usage—stakeholders in terms of usage or stakeholders in terms of support.

Q: So you would probably say that the strongest educational program would be the school groups? What would you say the weakest one is or one that needs more improvement?

Chin: Adult education.

Q: That's what you would like to see the Museum taking on more?

Chin: Yes, that really has to be our next phase of community participation and unless you've got space and programs that can draw all them in—I mean, we really do need the capacity for adult education programs that can get people to come into the property on a regular basis.

Q: When I talked to Jason last month, he mentioned that there were plans to construct a visitor center.

Chin: Yes.

Q: I just have a few questions about that. Is there a timeline?

Chin: We don't have one.

Q: Okay, no timeline.

Chin: It's been dragging on now for almost six years and last year they sent out an RFP [request for proposal] for a new architect. They wanted to completely rethink the project. They found someone in June and they gave them approximately a year to come up with a plan. Of course, once the city takes a look at that plan they may say, "Well, no, no, no, we can't do that." We have to finish and then they begin the process of modification. It won't be until end of May or middle of June before the city even looks at what the architects have put together. Even if they look at it and say, "Perfect, we're going to go with it, as it is, it fits the budget." The timeline from there on would be approximately eighteen months. It all depends on when they put the backhoe on the property and dig the first hole.

Q: Are you looking at the next five years or somewhere around then?

Chin: Hopefully it will be long before that but maybe not.

Q: Who would be the intended audience of the visitor center?

Chin: I don't look at the visitor center as being an audience-focused sort of place. I think of the visitor center as being something that accommodates our ability to vary what we offer. It would

take some of the stress of several thousand second graders off the house. We're planning on having a large flex space within the facility so school groups could do more of the detrimental aspects of activities in there instead of the house. It would expand our ability to—well, one thing it would do—it would waterproof our public events. Right now, they are outdoors. If it rains, we're in trouble. This would give us the capacity to pull those inside and still have an event. It would give us the ability to have an adult education program because most of those programs would want to function either on weekends or, particularly, in the evenings. Right now, we can't do anything in the evening. Once it gets dark—we're done. The house is not large and it doesn't have the capacity for lighting in the evenings. So, that would greatly enhance our ability to bring people into the property at times when it is actually convenient for them.

It would also mean that on the weekends we could have all sorts of programming going on in there while we're still running house tours. Right now, once a month, we have the local block association's regular monthly meeting in the house on a Saturday morning. It's always the second Saturday of the month and that's a tour I can't lead because they're right in the middle of the house. The more of that type of participation we get in the facility the better we like it but the more it encumbers the house itself. It's going to be able to allow us to do multitasking, really.

It would also give us the ability to do rentals—public rentals. We've had people call up on a fairly regular basis and say, "Oh, can we get married out here?" I say, "Great, well, come on out and take a look at the house." And they go, "Oooo, what's that behind the house?" And I say, "That's the junkyard." "Oh, I don't want that in my pictures." We've never really had very much success with our public rentals in any capacity. We have had several film shoots out here but

they've always been—the ones that actually happen—have been documentaries about the house. So, they don't mind what's around it. But we have had other people come out and site it for locations for things. The surroundings are a problem and so is the capacity of the house to support the kind of electric needs for the tech that they need for filming inside. So most of the filming we encourage to be outside but then you've got your other issues.

Once we've got that thing up it's going to give us the ability to do a lot more in terms of public use of all sorts and that definitely is income generating. It would let us get the gift shop out of the house and put it in the visitor center. It would also give people a place to sit out of the rain when they show up an hour early. That, to me, is important, too, because you can lose people. If you're in the middle of a tour and people show up and don't want to wait for the next one then you're really kind of stuck because, particularly on the weekends when I am here alone, there are things that I am supposed to do between the scheduled tour times and a lot of times I don't get to any of it. But they beg, and they plead, and they're not going to want to stand in the rain, and you don't want to send them to McDonald's. This would give us the capacity to bring them into a space where there is something for them to look at. There's a gallery, for instance, with exhibits that we can put up in there. And a gift shop that they can prowl around. It is also some place where even if they just want to sit down for a half an hour, you know, out of the elements. In the winter that is particularly important. In the summer, I don't mind sending them to the picnic tables but in the winter, it's really important. And it will also have real bathrooms.

Q: That would work for school groups.

Chin: Yeah.

Q: So the visitor center would be a gift shop, a gallery space, and large rooms?

Chin: A large flex space. We're also going to put all of the offices over there so this trailer is going to go away. The caretaker's apartment would be included in that building because we have a twenty-four—Jason [Gaspar] lives here. It will also have storage space, which we seriously lack at the moment. It's going to encompass a lot of things. The public space is probably only going to be about fifty percent of what that structure will represent for us. It will also be an enormous signpost because right now people will drive by and not see us. I've literally been on the cell phone with people driving over in their car saying, "I can't find you." "Look out your window. Can you see the big fence?" "Yes." "That's us!" "But I can't see the house, where's the house?" Because once the trees are out, you know, we're almost invisible from a lot of directions.

Q: It's a lot smaller than people would probably think it is.

Chin: It is and it's not close to the street. It's in the far corner of the property and, particularly, if you're on Ralph Avenue you can't see it unless you turn around and look back. Having something on that corner that has an enormous physical presence is going to be a signpost for us. It's going to be a welcoming channel that funnels people right into the park. We're hoping that it will also serve to point out that this is a park and that if you come on the property you are not going to be forced to take a tour of the house.

Q: You can just wander around.

Chin: Yeah, a lot of people seem to think that they don't want to come inside the gate because if they do we're going to force them to go into the house. "But I don't want to take a tour." "You don't have to." And the window of the gift shop will be on the street side, so if people want to come in and go shopping—lovely! Earned income.

Q: Are there any other avenues of outreach that are going to go along with the visitor center?

Chin: I'm sure there are but we aren't necessarily certain of what all of them are going to be until we know what they're going to give us. That's a little hard to anticipate. We've got a lot of changes to public programs that we're kind of brainstorming at the moment but we haven't settled on anything in particular because, once again, we don't know what we're going to get.

Q: Anything you could tell me?

Chin: We would like to do some evening types of events. In particular, for years, we did open hearth cooking over the fire pit in the summer but the trouble was it got dark at 7:00 PM and that's about the time that most people are getting home from work. So, we'd like to start doing some summer evening things in particular, maybe bringing out some local bands to play, and possibly having a movie night. All kinds of things we can do on the property after dark. And maybe even some fundraiser events where you literally have to be on the list at the gate to get in

because you're going to be paying, hopefully, some substantial money for those events. But they're things we can't do right now.

Q: I think that's a great direction for you to go in. I just wanted to ask a few questions about the surrounding community. I know that you've touched on some already. How you have seen it evolve over the years?

Chin: I haven't seen it evolve that much but the evolution—I'm pretty sure I know when the evolution happened. Of course, the Dutch were here forever and they didn't really start moving out of this area, and selling off the land, until the first quarter of the twentieth century. By then, most of the workforce on the Dutch owned farms were Irish and Italian and they stayed in the area for a very long time. In the early 1970s, however, the Irish and Italian migration to Long Island began to happen. People started to filter out of the city—in the 1970s people were filtering out of all parts of the City and going in various directions. The people from this end of Kings County were moving further into Long Island. It was a steady stream.

What was filling in behind them as they moved out—and some of them are still here—but what was moving in behind that exodus were the new immigrants from the Caribbean. And today, this is probably the largest Caribbean Diaspora in the Northeast, certainly—possibly not in the country but certainly in the Northeast. And this is all of the islands—it's not just from Jamaica, it's to just from Trinidad—it's everybody. It's the French-speaking, the English-speaking, and a little bit of the Dutch-speaking population. They all make up probably about ninety percent of the current population in this area.

Q: What has the current community's relationship been to the house or even the past community's?

Chin: I'd say that most of them don't even know that we exist. We were renovated between 1980 and 1982, so the previous population, which was essentially Italian and Irish, only knew this place as the tar paper shack. It was sitting in the junkyard behind the large gas station—the Colonial gas station. By the time the renovation happened, probably more than fifty percent of the neighborhood had become Caribbean. For a very long time—I'd say probably until 2001—nobody knew that this was even a museum or a public park. The gate was always locked and there was no staff. I had a friend that worked over in the [Brooklyn] Terminal Market. I used to drive over and pick her up sometimes and I just thought that this was some guy with a really big yard and—how did he luck out! There was no signage—there was nothing.

In 2001, the association hired an executive director who was an architectural historian. Since then, it really functioned as a pretty well staffed museum with regular hours and regular programs and so on. But still, large parts of the neighborhood don't even know we're here. When people come from the bus and wander off in the wrong direction, you know, go to the left instead of the right, and they ask somebody where the museum is they'll say, "What museum?" On the other hand, we have two block associations in the immediate neighborhood who are very intensely involved with us. So, some portions of the neighborhood really do know that we're here and what we are.

One of the epiphanies that we had was in about 2004, we were doing a fire pit demonstration outside and this little old man, he must have been in his nineties, he comes on his cane creeping down the walk and he walks up to the fire pit and he points to the pot that we've got on and he says, "My grandmother did that, that's called a Dutchy, my grandmother did that." It was the Dutch oven and it was sort of like—Kathy and I looked at each other and went, "Of course." In the seventeenth century, the Dutch owned most of the Caribbean. So, all of a sudden, we've got this connect at food. We have tried to exploit that as much as we possibly can. That and St. Nicholas day. There was one year when I was putting up the banners on the Ralph Avenue side of the fence and another elderly gentleman came over to me and started singing the St. Nicholas day song in French. So we've got at least a couple of things that we've always done out here that the community can recognize.

Sometimes when the garden has been in full bloom—there was one year I particular when we were trying to plant as many vegetables and what not as we could that would have something to do with the Caribbean cuisine. Unfortunately, most of them don't do well at this stratum of the growing zone. They're too much further south. A few things survived but not most of them. But over the course of time we've been trying to do a certain amount of outreach to the immediate community and just trying to figure out what it is that is important to them. That's another thing that I think the visitor center is really going to clear up for us a lot. If when we do make some kind of contact with them, there is some place to bring them in. And not just, come hang out in the yard.

Q: That's great. So, I've heard about St. Nicholas day. There was a little bit of controversy with Black Peter. Do you have any insight into that?

Chin: Oh yeah, it landed on us that morning. I'm going to lie this in the lap of our board of directors, really, because they called up in a panic and, "Oh, you got to do this, you got to do that, you got to do this, you got to do that." Never asking us what we actually did in the first place. The Dutch, the current Dutch concept of Zwarte Piet is Disneyland. The Dutch as a culture are still coming to terms with what we would call politically correct. Socially sensitive is probably the way I'd put it. They're a little bit backward in that respect but they're starting to get the point. However, what we have done with Black Pete right from the very beginning—he was always there, he was there in the seventeenth century and there was only one of him.

There weren't twelve of him and there weren't twenty-four of him—the Dutch have a multitude. Even their Nicholas, frankly, is often portrayed as a cartoon but when you get into the cartoons of Pete, the caricature there is something people are a lot more sensitive about. Our Pete is dressed in the seventeenth century. He's got the doublet and the whole nine yards. Nicholas is dressed as a proper Bishop with the crosier and the whole thing. They come in on horseback, as they would have done for the Dutch. There are certain aspects of Pete's character that we kind of leave out but there are also certain aspects of St. Nichols's character that we leave out. Nick eventually evolves into Santa Claus and he's still thought of as ho, ho, ho this jolly old man. As a proper prince of the church in the Dutch version of him, he was tall, slender, and extremely austere and Pete was kind of the enforcer who then became comic relief.

So we've left out the things about if you're on the bad side of the list instead of the good side of the list, Pete stuffs you in the sack where the toys were and takes you back to Spain. We've left out the thing with the birch rod. That's not anywhere. But he is definitely Nick's companion and he has a role to play in the handing out of treats and things. When we have kids in the house, we don't put him on the backburner in any way shape, or form. We're one of the few places in the United States who actually deals with him at all. Frankly, I think that the only way we're going to get away from your negative stereotypes of Black Pete—and he is, he's a Moor—I don't see any reason to walk around that. The only way you're going to get away from this stuff is to deal with it and we're dealing with it in the most respectful way that we possibly can.

One of the suggestions from one of our board members was, "Oh, paint him blue, paint him green, paint him any color but black." But we're not painting him any color. Then late in the afternoon they came up with this brilliant idea—why not hire a black actor? We've only been hiring a black actor for twelve years. So, come on guys, they could have cleared this whole thing up if they had once sent us an email that said, "What exactly are you doing?" Instead of going on a Dutch site and looking at what they're doing and assuming that that's what we're doing. The Dutch always play him as a white man in black face. When my goddaughter came over a number of years ago, she participated in one of the St. Nicholas events. She was actually shocked that we had a black actor playing Pete. She couldn't understand why anybody—because she was already starting to think of him as a bit of caricature—but she couldn't understand why we would expect a black actor to do that. And it's like, well, the insult is the other one—the white guy in black face. Hire a black actor and let him own it. They have a very, very small non-Dutch population and of their population that isn't Dutch, a great deal of it is Indonesian so they're still just

beginning to get back after the Second World War. They lost all of the Jewish population they lost all of their—this is another place where I have a problem with politically correct, outside of the United States, African American does not apply. My friend, Andy Stewart-Jones, has an absolute fit when somebody calls him African American because he's very, very British. The moment he opens his mouth you know that but nobody knows what to call him. They say, "What do they call you in Britain?" and he says, "British."

Q: That's a great response. I was wondering is there any other difficult history or socially sensitive history or heritage that you also have to negotiate with?

Chin: Well, there were slaves on the property and we do have several slave documents in our archive—mostly from the nineteenth century—and sometimes the Wyckoffs can be a little sensitive about that. You have to be careful who to talk to when you get to the end of the tour where the documents are on display. You may or may not want to address that depending on who they are. It's something that we cannot really deal with for the schoolchildren—in the second grade, they haven't gotten there yet.

Q: Is there an age level where you address it?

Chin: Well, that's about the only age level we get. I'd say ninety percent of our school visits are second grade because that is where we fall in the City's curriculum. They don't really revisit it again until they're in junior high or high school and by then they're not making field trips anymore. So it's very infrequently that we even get middle school kids in here. I don't know

where slavery falls into the curriculum in the school system and it would probably be worthwhile finding out but we're just not seeing that level of kids at this point. It's not that we would not want to develop a program that addressed it—it's just not on the plate when they come in. So mostly, it's adults that we address it with and I have no problem addressing it with any of the people who come in for the architecture tours or for the cultural tours of Kings County and its evolution because it is very much a part of the evolution. The fact is the Dutch were throughout most of American history—they and the Portuguese—were the two largest slave trading countries in the world and we were the end market for that. This area held slaves right up to the minute of the emancipation.

One of the documents that we have in there is actually an indenture where Nicholas Schenck, who was in this neighborhood, is renting one of his slaves to Abraham Wyckoff who owned this house at the time. Part of the contract says that at the moment of emancipation certain things had to be done. It was phased emancipation over a court. I think it was from 1780 onward that they knew that in stages it was going to be phased out of existence. Part of that last phase required that slave owners do certain things before the slaves were free, which included teaching them to read and write, giving them a bible, and at least two sets of new clothes. He had to agree to take on this responsibility and cost of it as part of that rental agreement. So these guys are buying and selling and renting back and forth right up to the fourth of July 1827.

Some of them emancipated early, the Lott family emancipated all of their slaves very early in the nineteenth century. We do have a manumission document from 1812 where one of the Wyckoffs in Queens has voluntarily freed his slave Kato. But by and large, it's an area of history that isn't

terribly well understood. We know a lot about plantation slavery, which is big and obvious. A few years ago the New York Historical Society did a really, really fine job of talking about slavery in New York but to them New York is Manhattan. It was really about urban slavery and it was very, very interesting but it didn't trickle out into small farm slavery that made up upstate and Long Island. That's an area that still needs a lot of scholarship.

It is not very well understood but it was prevalent. We know—I actually have a copy of the 1755 slave census for New York from Ulster County to Nassau County and except for New York City itself, it lists all of the slaves in that area. There are approximately four thousand and five hundred of them, which would have been a single county in the South and it's just the slaves above the age of fourteen. It lists the name of the slaveholder, how many male slaves, and how many female slaves. Most farms only had one of two and it would be either or sometimes you have one of each. You can sometimes tell from which type of slaves they had what the make of the family was. A woman could not run these households alone. So if you've got a female slave and that's the only slave, she's probably working in the house. On the other hand, if it's a male slave, he's out in the fields because she didn't have enough sons. I do have information about that. It also shows—and this actually surprised me, I'd expected to find a lot of Wyckoffs peppered throughout this document, and there were only three and all three of them were in this community.

The one in Queens who in 1812 emancipates Kato isn't in the book so either the family wasn't in Queens yet or if they were, they didn't own slaves at that point in time. We're not really certain when they first began owning slaves on this property. I think the high point of the documents that

we have and in certainly the document of the census shows that they had three. That was probably about average and not all of the households had them. They'd rent them out to each other, particularly in harvesting and planting times, so you'd have a workforce. But they rented out their sons the same way.

Q: Were the farms small or large?

Chin: Well, in the seventeenth century most farms were in between one hundred and 125 acres and that was generally considered to be about the amount of land you needed in order to make a sufficient profit to survive. Anything smaller than that would really have been a subsistence farm just for the family. They did continually buy land, by the time Pieter who was the original occupant of this farm died, he was according to the British tax rolls, paying tax on more land than anybody else in the community but that doesn't mean it was all in one piece. He had farms that were scattered all over the place and he left them to his own kids when he died.

Most of them had multiple farms so what they would do is that they'd own one in particular that they worked and the other two or three they would rent out to tenant farmers. It's difficult to say whether or not this farm increased and decreased or if it changed its size or shape. We don't know exactly what its shape was at the time it was first parceled out in the seventeenth century. What we do know—I've got a map that shows the general shape of it by 1870. That orange spot. In comparison to the county in which it sits, it looks like a substantial sized farm but I don't know what the acreage was at that point in time.

Q: When did it become this plot?

Chin: Sometime in the early 1960s.

Chin: *[Refers to photographs]* This is the house in 1903. This is Canarsie Lane as a highway on the north side of the house. There's nothing around it. As you can pretty much see it's just open, flat territory.

Our neighbors across the street—this is the Lott house and he's literally where the brick row houses are today on the opposite side of Clarendon Road. [Samuel J.] Tilden High School is actually back behind these trees, so this is where Beverly Road would be today. So this is the landscape and this picture by the way he was taken in 1914. So we've been inside New York City for quite some time.

This, by the way, is the corner of Kings Highway and Canarsie Lane, roughly where Clarendon is.

Q: When was this taken?

Chin: This was probably taken in the 1930s. That was kind of what the neighborhood was. I've got another shot. This is the house, again, looking down Clarendon. So this would be right about where the lot, the vacant lot next to the carwash is. Taken about from that position, looking

down Canarsie Lane towards Kings Highway. This is how close the neighbors were from the most part, so it's pretty close.

By the time, however, we got to the 1920s—there's a reason we are seven feet below grade and here's some of that reason. It's the landfill. Robert Moses decided he was going to fill in the salt marsh that made up the coast of King's County. He needed to landfill the marshland in order to build the belt parkway and this is the trailing edge of that landfill. Really there's no good reason why they didn't just knock the house down and keep on going because you could see it's not in very good shape but they just didn't bother. So we were ignored into existence but you can already see that the city is starting to have a presence on the horizon. Now the Terminal Market has not been built yet and the Terminal Market is actually sitting on top of our farm.

Q: The Terminal Market?

Chin: The Brooklyn Terminal Market has Key Foods distribution centers in there, Mr. Pickles is in there, there's a lot of wholesale distributors of produce and various things that are concentrated in there as well as landscape companies but it's almost entirely industrial. It's not someplace where—it's not a flower shop where you can walk in and buy. I'd say the bulk of what's in the Terminal Market is produce—fruit and that kind of thing. There are a couple of meat vendors and fish vendors in there but it's all intended to go out to supermarkets for the most part. There's another one, Hunt's Point, it's really the bigger of the two. It is up in the Bronx.

Chin: *[Referring to photograph]* That's the 1950s. Here's the Colonial gas station, this is Clarendon Road, and there's the house. We have been completely absorbed by the community.

There's the house. This is Clarendon, this is Ralph, the gas station is in the front, we're there in the back, here's the junkyard, and this is Nazareth. So the whole neighborhood—this is, once again, the mid-1950s—so the whole neighborhood by now is really under development. The Terminal Market is out in this direction, out here. So, you know, things are changing. This back here is Ditmas Road, it is actually paved here, but here it isn't. This is what it looked like, it was filled with overflow from the junkyard, and it was still a dirt road. It wasn't paved until sometime in the mid-1960s.

So as we trundle along, finally the gas station is gone. The Wyckoff Association actually turned the purchase of this land into a pet project with the intention that they were going to donate the house to the city as a museum once it was free and clear. It took him about ten years to get out of there, though, because whoever wrote that contract at the purchase didn't do a very good job of limiting his time to relocate the business. He was there for a long time and unfortunately by the 1960s this is what we look like. This is what most of the people who come for tours remember who grew up here and went to school here in the 1970s. They remember the tar paper shack. Then in 1980, a bunch of teenagers broke in and set fire to the center parlor and the fire department was here in a heartbeat not because this was historic site, I'm not even sure if they knew it was a historic site, but because they were afraid that the shack fire was going to get into the junkyard and just burn forever. Get into the grease and the gasoline and you know. So that

really jumpstarted the city. Realize that by now that's already a National Historic Landmark even in that condition.

Q: In 1965, right?

Chin: Well certainly in 1980 when all of this happened. It was landmarked in every possible direction you could think of and yet it was still falling apart. Now, it's on the radar and the City finally decided that they were going to have to do something. Decisive. One thing I've got to give them is once they start, they do a really, really good job. They were done in eighteen months. I think they gave us a two-year window of opportunity and they were done fairly early. They employed a firm of timber frame restoration experts. They used period reproduction tools and they used joinery techniques that were appropriate to each century of the house and so did a really, really excellent job.

They did a fine job and unfortunately, when we were out of that phase and had to go into the phases of becoming an actual active museum that took another span of time. But that really had nothing to do with restoration or any of that sort of stuff. It was mainly a matter of the fact that we were mostly being operated by the Wyckoff Association and they really didn't know anything about how to operate a museum. It took them a long time to get their feet under them and it really wasn't until 2001 that we began any kind of regular existence as a proper museum.

But the evolution of the neighborhood, and you can see even in the first quarter of the twentieth century, this was still really open, undeveloped, agrarian territory. It's not until the late twentieth

century this was still really open, undeveloped, agrarian territory. It's not until the late twenties when the landfill starts coming in when things began to crop up around us. Most of the row houses over here and out in that direction were actually built after the Second World War on the GI bill [Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. They were intended as starter homes for the troops coming back. The character of the neighborhood really resides most firmly in the early 1950s I'd say.

Q: The time between 1902 and 1960s, when the house wasn't owned by the Wyckoffs, who owned it?

Chin: A series of developers. Right around the turn of the century practically everything—the map is very telling. This is the city of Brooklyn in 1897—that's twenty-six years before Brooklyn becomes part of New York City—and at this point Brooklyn is the third largest city in the United States. Only Chicago and New York were larger than Brooklyn and only London was larger than New York. That fact really can't be discounted to the degree with which it drove New York's obsession to become the largest city in the world. It did it by acquiring the outer boroughs. It never quite made it—it came close—but it never ever quite beat out London. But the City of Brooklyn all by itself is doing something that none of the other communities outside of Manhattan did—Queens never did it and Staten Island never did it. Brooklyn started out as a little tiny village right here overlooking Lower Manhattan.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, Wallabout Market was established over here and the dockyards were established and that brought industry into the community and at that time

Brooklyn just began to expand like nobody's business and by this point in time it's certainly a city. It has most of the industry and most of the jobs. When the Brooklyn Bridge was built it was actually built to get people who lived in Manhattan to work in Brooklyn because Manhattan had the larger population and Brooklyn had all the jobs. Once the railroad came across—and it's obviously not there yet—once the railroad came across, Brooklyn itself began to expand very rapidly. Right around the time that it was absorbed into the City of New York, which was generally referred to as the 1898 mistake, most of the farms in Kings County were purchased by developers because they could see how fast the city itself was expanding.

Two years before it was absorbed by the City of New York, Brooklyn annexed the last independent community in Kings County, which was Gravesend. By that point in time there is absolutely, municipality speaking, no difference between Brooklyn and Kings County. Queens—you're still riding into Astoria or Forest Hills today. No individual community in Queens began to absorb its neighbors but Brooklyn had taken over the entire county by the time it was absorbed into New York City. And yet by the 1914, this area is—at least looks—still very rural. Municipality it is within the City but in other ways it's still very, very rural. But the landfill was really what finally started all of that.

Now there was a series of developers that owned it and then it was owned by the Greek family named Alapharis *[phonetic]*. I'm not sure if they had—that area is a little murky for me—I'm not entirely certain if they had sold the house to the gas station or if the house was purchased from them but somehow there was a connection between the house and the gas station. We did have to buy out all that property in the front otherwise we'd still be back behind some structure.

But it was owned by several people in succession and I do believe that the gas station was the last actual owner of it. They were using it as a storage facility for hubcaps and windshield wipers and all that stuff.

Q: Do you know what mobilized the Wyckoffs to take action?

Chin: They started their genealogical society in 1937 and the family today numbers somewhere around fifty-five to sixty thousand throughout the U.S. and Canada. And they're all descendent from four of the kids that grew up in the house.

Q: And there are all the variations of names?

Chin: There are about fifty variations of the name. There hasn't been a new instance of it since the census of 1900 so they can pretty much put a cap on how many there are. But most of them are on the West Coast. The largest concentration of Wyckoffs in the country is in Seattle and I think the second largest is down towards the Los Angeles area. They began holding regular reunions, trying to find as many of their cousins as they possibly could, and apparently at some point some cousin from the east coast mentioned that the house was still standing. We do have some photographs from the early 1950s of a bunch of middle-aged Wyckoffs standing on the road behind it looking down into the property, inspecting the house. It just kind of became a pet project for the Association. It was something I think that was helping them to bring membership in. It was something of interest to save the old family homestead. They did fundraisers for years and I believe the price that they eventually had to come up with was $37,000, which is a car

today but in those days it was a lot of money and it was a shack. They did have to pay for the entire chunk of land and get rid of the gas station. I don't think that it was any one galvanizing moment in particular it was probably something that they debated for a while, "Well, we know the house is still there, do we really want to do this? Do we think we can do this? Can we support it after it's been done?"

That was one of the reasons that they donated it to the city after they purchased it. They knew they couldn't afford the renovation and restoration of the property. In order to function as a museum in this city you really need your charities. You have to have some kind of sponsoring agency—somebody to actually run the functioning of the museum and the association, kind of by default, fell into that category. I'm not sure they've really been the best fit in a lot of ways. The Association really is about the family and so it makes membership of non-family members a little difficult because, "We're not cousins and we may not be interested in going to their reunions."

On the other hand, they are an enormous support to us and we don't want to lose the connection with the family that this house actually generated, so it's an ongoing problem. For a long time, the only thing you really needed to become a member of the Association was that you were a Wyckoff. That's no longer true. We don't really have a board—I mean our board is primarily made up of Wyckoffs and they are all over the country. We've got one in New York City but the next closest one is in Connecticut. Then there's one up near Albany, then there is one in Virginia, one in Ohio, one in Illinois, one in Florida, and it makes it very difficult to have a board meeting. They're conference calls and the ones who are not actually on site don't have a great deal of

understanding of what a city museum is about and that goes beyond our mission. It just goes into things like how do we deal with the local politicians and all of that kind of stuff. It's not necessarily the best fit but they've supported us for a really long time. They're loyal and they're determined. And we are in better shape than some of the houses in the HHT [Historic House Trust]. For instance, the Dyckman House has not got—

Q: I have not visited that house.

Chin: Well, they're interesting. Just after the Revolutionary War, the Dyckman family owned that whole north end of Manhattan, where the island gets skinny, right from the Seventeenth Century. The house and farm were taken over by the British. After the battle of Long Island, they owned New York. It's high ground and from up there at the top of the ridge you could see into New Jersey and you could see halfway to Queens and Brooklyn. It is like a perfect strategic location and the officers were housed in the house and on the backside of the ridge was the Hessian village, which is where the mercenaries lived. They actually have a reconstruction of one of those Hessian huts that they brought up close to the house now. When the Revolutionary War was over the Dyckmans moved north and stayed with some relatives. They had no idea if they were ever going to see their property again but when the war was over they came back down and found that before they had left the British had poisoned the wells, burned the crops, killed all of the animals, and destroyed the house. I refer to them quite a bit when I do some of my tours depending on the interest of the people that are involved in the tours because they really were the poster children for what happened if the Dutch left their farms.

Since the British owned this territory, if they wanted to go out and fight they had to go out to a New Jersey regiment or a Rhode Island regiment something like that, which meant being offsite and they knew perfectly well what was going to happen and it happened to Dyckman. So for me it is a really good connection, historically, between what happened here and what happened there and why. But as a museum at the moment they have one staff member. I mean in a lot of ways we're small and we're kind of struggling but we're four times the workforce than the Dyckmans got at the moment and they don't have that association that backs them up. Lefferts [Manor] in Prospect Park has the entire [Prospect Park] Alliance and even at that, this year, they had to cut back their school programs to zero.

I think from our standpoint, if we were forced to the wall and had to cut something, we would probably have to cut our public tours. They prefer to hold onto their public tours and, at least for the time being, back off of their school programs.

Q: Do they just have a larger crowd for public tours?

Chin: They do. They have an enormously larger crowd than we do because they are right between the zoo and the carousel and across the street from the Botanic Garden. They got a lot of foot traffic. We have virtually none but our school groups are enormous.

Q: Are the school groups just from Brooklyn?

Chin: No, we get Queens. We don't get much from Staten Island or the Bronx because it's so far away that the buses can't make the circuit and then get back into the rotation at the end of the day. The school groups are usually here from ten AM to twelve PM and then there've got to be off the property because that is when the bus has to go. But we do see quite a few from Manhattan. Private schools—they're actually something that we need to court even been more because they are not dependent on the city's school bus system because they can find other ways to get over here. Once in a great while we will have a high school. We've actually had a high school in Connecticut that's come out two or three times—I don't want to know what their tuition is if they can fund that kind of a field trip.

Mainly they're from Brooklyn but they're not necessarily from the immediate surrounding schools. For instance, we've never seen any of the several schools that are now in what used to be Nazareth, which used to be a high school. Now they've got—I don't really understand this whole concept of having these little bitty schools in the same building but they've got several of them. They could walk! They're never over. On the other hand, we've got teachers coming for years and they call early and they book multiple days right from the very beginning and they tend to fill up very fast. So right now we're still getting phone calls from people for whom we are not high on the radar and they can't understand that we're already booked through the end of the year.

Q: I think that you've covered my questions. Just for a wrap up question, what are you most excited about future of the Museum?

Chin: The visitor center. I cannot wait to get my hands on the adult programming. The adult education thing—I mean I will be very, very happy when we have a much nicer, cooler, state of the art gift shop but I just want to get my hands on that flex space and start programming in there.

[END OF INTERVIEW]