SAVING PRESERVATION STORIES:

DIVERISTY AND THE OUTER BOROUGHS

The Reminiscences of

Cynthia Copeland

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Cynthia Copeland conducted by Interviewer Liz H. Strong on October 13, 2017. This interview is part of the *Saving Preservation Stories: Diversity and the Outer Boroughs* oral history project.

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.

Seneca Village was a community consisting mostly of free black people and immigrants, which was destroyed in the late 1800s. The area was seized through eminent domain to become part of Central Park, evicting roughly 1,600 people from their homes and community. Cynthia Copeland shares the process of rediscovering the history of Seneca Village through the archives at the New York Historical Society and city records such as the census. There was an archeological dig of the area in 2011, led by Diana diZerega Wall and Nan A. Rothschild that discovered many artifacts, such as household items. Copeland was also involved in researching Weeksville as part of the landmark designation of the Hunterfly Road Houses.

Cynthia Copeland is a historian and has curated several exhibitions for the New York Historical Society. She helped to organize and run their education program about Seneca Village for middle school aged students. She, along with Nan Rothschild and Diana Wall formed the Seneca Village Project in 1998.

Transcriptionist: Matthew Geesey | Session: 1

Interviewee: Cynthia Copeland | Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Liz H. Strong (Q1), Anthony Bellov (Q2) | Date: October 13, 2017

Q1: Okay, well, whenever you're ready. Do you want to mark our tape or shall I?

Q2: I'll clap**.**

Q1: Okay.

Q2: Let me make sure that's recording. We seem to be rolling. It is October thirteenth, Friday the thirteenth. We had this conversation. Cynthia Copeland, Liz H. Strong interviewer and Anthony Bellov, videographer and here is the sound clap.

Q1: Okay, Cynthia, thank you so much for being here. This will be an interview about Seneca Village for the New York Preservation Archive Project. Just to get us started—oh, good thinking. I'll wait until you do that. Just to get us started, tell me a little bit about when and where you were born, your life growing up.

Copeland: Okay, well, I am the daughter of a military serviceperson. My dad was in the Coast Guard, the United States Coast Guard. So we moved around a little bit. I was actually born in San Juan, Puerto Rico and my family—we've lived in Florida, Puerto

Rico, California, but primarily in New York. I would say I was raised primarily on Governors Island when the Coast Guard held the occupation of that base.

It was really an incredible experience to grow up over on Governors Island in terms of community, in terms of history, which is where I became interested in history. My friends and I would always sort of walk around the island and find arrowheads and marbles and things of that sort, go into the castle because a lot of the events for children were held in Castle Williams and in other spaces of historic significance.

For example, I was a Girl Scout, so the Girls Scouts were held in those places. Boy Scouts [of America] were held there as well; just sort of the freedom to roam around the island and make explorations, going into Fort Jay, babysitting families that lived in Fort Jay, sledding down the hills along what was then the golf course of Fort Jay in the winters. This was in the late ‘60s, early ‘70s, as a young child and then growing up throughout.

Yes, that’s kind of the early upbringing and truly, I did my formative years were there on Governors Island.

Q1: How old are you?

Copeland: So I have very, very fond memories there. Don’t make me tell my age *[laughs]*.

Q1: You don't have to if you don't want to. I'm just curious. Tell me instead just some of your first impressions—I mean moving there, how was it different from other places you had lived before and what were details that stood out to you?

Copeland: It wasn't that different because you move from military base to military base, there's kind of this feel to it. There's the commissary. They're often self-contained communities. So you have your churches, your synagogues, your bowling alleys. These places are very small-town USA kinds of spaces and it's really one of these areas where families really get to know one another. You create very tight bonds with your friends. Although in my family's case, we actually stayed on Governors Island for a very long period of time. My dad would often be transferred but would be transferred in the New York state area or New York City or Tristate area.

I have a brother who has cerebral palsy and I think when we came to the city, the special ed [education] programs that were available seemed to work for the family. So I suspect—I don't know this to be true but I suspect that there was consideration for that. So I think that is one of the reasons why we were able to spend twelve, almost thirteen years on the island.

So my siblings and I really had an incredible and enriching experience of being in New York, being on this very sort of sheltered space but being able to go off into the big city. I mean I witnessed the World Trade Center towers being built from my window.

Then when the time came, there was a school, an elementary school on the base. So from grades K [kindergarten] through sixth, you could go there. Then there was a feeding system to a school in the Gramercy Park area of Manhattan and then there was a feeding system from that school. Most people who lived on the base went to a school on Staten Island. I did not go to that school on Staten Island. I ended up going to [Fiorello H.] LaGuardia School of—at the time, it was called Music and Arts.

So taking the ferry every morning and getting on the subway to head uptown when it was up in the City College [of New York] area was quite interesting. People thought my journey was so far and long but those of us who went to Music and Arts from Governors Island, we would meet our friends who came from Staten Island and they had even a farther trek to go. So we would travel together and hike up these incredible steps through the park on 135th Street and go to Music and Arts and have a great time.

So I've had a lot of experiences, mixing and mingling with all kinds of people, arts-oriented, those who were truly interested in humanities, those who were truly interested in math and science and so on and so forth. I would say that a lot of my good friendships were actually established in my young years. I still keep in touch with a lot of people who grew up on Governors Island as well as those in my middle school as well as my high school.

Q1: Sounds like an amazing community. You mentioned that your interest in history developed there. I was wondering if you could say more about that, the adventures finding arrowheads but also how did you start to learn about the history of that space and what did it mean to you when you learned it?

Copeland: So I'm just curious. I just think that structures are very interesting to me and I think when you have sort of old structures and new structures and this idea of this very—there's just a sense of history because you just know it. There are plaques that say Peter Minuit and Stuyvesant, so on and so forth. These names are just all around.

They were curious to me and of course, I was fed stories that are not necessarily true but they're good for young people because there's this kind of cute narrative. We all sort of buy into it and it's just sort of an easy way to sort of establish a way of understanding dates. In terms of child development where you are—you have to make sure that stories are sort of age appropriate, even though they may be historical fiction *[laughter]*. But I certainly bought into it.

The fact that I was able to sort of do history versus just reading it, you kind of raise questions because you would find things. For example, with archaeology, finding little bits of bottles or finding as I said the arrowheads or marbles, just odd things that just seemed very—seeing cannonballs that are just kind of dispersed throughout your space as you walk through. The smell of the chestnuts that are growing on the trees and you can see that these trunks of the trees are really huge and they're very old. What was this place

before? Who walked on this earth before me? What does this place really mean? I just think that it was inevitable to be able to not be affected by the sense of history.

Also my dad was an African-American who enlisted in the military and he rose to the highest ranks that he could as an officer. So that kind of race and history and sexism and gender and all that stuff, all these kinds of issues were certainly circulating. We were at a time period when the Vietnam War was kind of in the news when I was in elementary school. My dad did a tour on a ship over in Vietnam for a year. My mom was kind of a single mom raising us on the base while my dad was away. So all these issues, they all sort of intersect.

I mean I can't say that I was that sophisticated and astute in current events to know all the complexity of it but you certainly knew that as someone who—your dad goes far away or you have friends who are stationed in Germany or Alaska, all these different places that are domestic but far away or overseas. You get a sense of this global connection and so you start to—I think in my case and in the case of a lot of my friends, we were just asking lots of questions about what does it mean to be living in this space, how am I connected to the world and so on and so forth.

It was just kind of natural things you're asking me about it but I don't really think about that because it was just so much a part of my existence at being. But I raised the issue of race. My dad was a very stoic—is still a very stoic human being and I can't honestly say I know a lot about what he did in the Coast Guard but I see him now as someone who

formed an organization called the African-American Stewards of the United States Coast Guard. He tries to get a lot of people of color because there were not only African-Americans but Latinos and Filipinos, very big in the Coast Guard, trying to get those individuals some sort of recognition and acknowledgment for the work that they did.

I can only imagine, I've read a little bit about military history and I've seen a lot of these guys who were people of color were put into positions that were certainly a respectable career choice but at the same time, what they were doing were often kind of low-level types of jobs. If they were on ships, some of these stewards who were not necessarily officers were washing dishes and doing kind of domestic types of work in the military. Though we say that the military is sort of an equalizing force and kind of is the most diverse of all the occupations and fields out there, it does seem that it's been sort of a very slow kind of evolutionary rise for people—men and women of color to get to some of the positions that they are in today.

But again, I was saying this because I often ask questions about what was it like for my dad but I see it's kind of painful for him to talk about some of those experiences. He loves the Coast Guard and will do everything for it, still to this day. He's running these events for this black stewards organization that I was telling you about. Just any time there's some kind of event, he just is very nostalgic about it.

That in and of itself also brought in a sense of what is this history of the military and what is this all about. Am I being indoctrinated into something called patriotism and

nationalism? Am I allowed to think different thoughts and sort of go—because on Governors Island or any Coast Guard base, when the flag is being raised and they blow the *Taps*, we have to stand at attention wherever we are. If we're walking around, you just kind of stand and wait for the flag to go up and at sunset, when they're lowering the flag, you would stand as children of Coast Guard families and/or civilians who would work in these spaces as well.

So it's an interesting and an odd way of growing up but it offers you a different perspective on life and being.

Q1: As you grew up and started to advance your own education, how did you start to unravel through your curiosity some of these historical fictions, as you call them? Can you give me an example of how you were able to access that?

Copeland: Sure. Well, I've always as an African-American female; there's always been sort of two stories. I think that it's you had to kind of learn how to live in one world and live in another world and bring them all together. Then you would find out my other friends who were Latinos or Filipinos or whatever, every now and then we'd come and question something that we didn't think was quite right.

So I think the first unraveling and the first sort of noticings about history probably dealt with race and gender because I fit the bill for both. So I was trying to think about—as a young kid, I was a tomboy and there were girlie girls, climbing on trees, and jumping into

the moat, things like that, hanging out with the guys versus the girls who were really very much about being girls, running around wearing their little bathing suits in the pool and kind of being quite interested in boys in different ways.

At that time, in the late ‘60s and the ‘70s, you’re eight, nine, ten, whatever, moving into those spaces, you are starting to think, well, why can’t I hang out with the boys? Why do I have to do it this way? So I think those early notions and ideas of gender typing and things of that sort certainly came within a question. Some of my friends, we were always kind of talking about those things.

Then I guess my family, my parents are originally from Savannah, Georgia and they were part of the Great Migration. My dad certainly was already moving but the rest of the family, my dad’s family, my paternal side for the most part stayed in Georgia but my maternal family moved north and a lot of family moved to New York and New Jersey. So I had contact with those individuals but I also noticed that where within my own family, there were environment and location and choices in terms of career and things of that sort, they had a major impact on family. So I have some cousins and aunts and uncles who did not have the same kind of upbringing that I had. And there can be rifts and tensions within families because your exposure to communities and ways of being raised and reared can shape who you are.

So whereas my family and a couple other of my cousins who lived in communities that were considered to be solid, healthy, middle-class, more on the right side of the

socioeconomic spectrum, often—there were other family members who were on the lower socioeconomic status. They had different relationships.

So understanding all of that and noticing that it was happening within my own family, has you sort of thinking again this idea of race, class, economics, what does that all bring. You can have these kinds of conversations. Often times, a lot of my family members would say that our family sort of—what's the word, appeared white. Not in a bad way but it's just, "You speak so well." We weren't just getting that from our own family. We were getting that from other people who had these preconceived notions of how black folks from the South who have been transferred and migrated to the North are supposed to behave or supposed to act and so on and so forth. We didn't fit the mold as well as many members of other parts of my family. There were other people who kind of ended up in different situations and were stereotypically pegged as being black Americans in America in an urban space.

So I'm saying that because this idea and this complexity of who we are and how we are shaped even within our own families, within our own cultures, within our own ethnicities, there's all kinds of—it's not monolithic. There's all kinds of mishegoss that goes on. We all have to learn to live with one another. The love is certainly there, the appreciation is there but people notice differences. Kids notice differences a lot and they're going to speak to that and talk about those things often.

So I had a lot of white friends, I had a lot of black friends. I had everybody. It was a diverse crowd of people. I call that a fortune. I was fortunate to be able to have that because it gave me empathy. It allowed me to sort of be able to be somewhat sympathetic to people's situations, positions. I wasn't so quick to come to judgment because I had a lot of exposure to different ways of being as opposed to some of my friends in communities that just kind of stuck with their own kind. They had difficulty kind of working through all those things.

So as I sit here rambling on and on about this, I say this though because I think it's really, really important. It's foundational and it's the essence of my being and who I am. I think that having had these experiences and these exposures to being in this experiment of integration and what does that mean because really truly the country was just coming into those phases and spaces in the '70s—late '60s and into the '70s.

That was really important and those kinds of experiences led to different kinds of conversations which led to different kinds of curiosities which led to different kinds of noticings about the world, which led to different kinds of trajectories into spaces like sociology and history and economics. We could see the intersectionality of all that at a young age.

So again, I think that as a public historian, as a social history individual, I am looking sort of at who we are as people and then sort of bringing it out into the world which includes looking at spaces, looking at the places where we live, looking at the meaning of those

spaces where we live, looking at things that came before and how things were used, material culture, all of those things. You can't separate yourself from history.

So when you ask that question, I'm sitting here and I'm rambling on and on but I just feel it's just who I am. It's in me and I can't be separated from it. I see history in everything. So I'm not surprised that I'm trying to help myself and help my family and help the broader community try to understand or at least appreciate and consider the impact and the influence of history in our lives and how we really just can't move forward without understanding that.

In order to do that, you've got to know who you are. You've got to know where you've come from. You've got to know as much as you can that will be revealed to you. Sometimes it's hard to find because it's digging and digging. Sometimes you meet roadblocks. Sometimes your best sources are your family but depending upon their experiences, they may be uncomfortable talking about things. So you have to respect that and you have to glean. There's conjecture, there's all kinds of things that we pull.

Then there's those folks who tell the same old darn story over and over again which kind of gets embellished at the Thanksgiving Day table. You're just like, wait a second, last year, you said this and that. I try to make sense of what are obviously kernels of truth but perhaps have been embellished somewhat to make for a better story. Then you try to—with the information, the evidence that you have try to tease it out and discern what is truly the truth. It's hard. Digging down to get to the truth, it's an excavation *[laughs]*.

It's a real excavation. You're meeting bits and pieces here and there and I'm a big fan. I'm not an archaeologist but I am a big fan of archaeology and I understand that as you go down through the strata, layer by layer, you're trying to figure out, oh, is this the original layer of soil? Oh, is this the original layer of dirt? Is this where I'm going to find the original stuff? All along the way, in different contexts, you find different pieces of things. You just try to piece it all together and we're the same way. Our DNA is kind of the same.

Q1: You've made me think about so many things. One of the things that really jumped out is the kind of repeating dynamic in your relationships of moving from one group to group where each set of people say something like you're more like them than like us. You're more like a boy than like a girl. You're more like white people because your family is middle class.

That assumption is rooted in the fact that we have limited imaginations because of limited access to our own history. But you were living that middle class for African-American families were possible. You were living that strength and activity for a woman was possible. But other people were falling into the assumptions because they didn't have the stories that told them that was possible.

Of course, I tie this to Seneca Village because one of the things in your research that you brought out was that these weren't squatters. These weren't impoverished people. These

were middle class landowners. That was a huge important discovery of your work. So I want to try and make that connection between your drive to uncover things in history and this overwhelming pressure of society to keep certain histories hidden. So whatever you want to say in response to that would be very interesting to me *[laughter]*.

Copeland: It's so huge *[laughs]*. But again, I think I come to the marginalized communities because of my experiences obviously. I always just think that there's another story to be told. There's more than two sides to every story. There's like a thousand sides to different stories. I think we as living human beings are responsible for trying to always get to the truth, to speak for people who didn't have a voice or who don't have a voice in present-day society, and try to help those who don't or it's perceived they don't have a voice in present-day society to give it to them and let them know that they have strength and they should be empowered to be able to do that.

For those who have come before, I just feel that it's really our responsibility to try to straighten out those stories because the master narrative has been catapulted. It's out there and it's been imprinted and it's etched in stone and it's been normalized. It's normalized against a particular way of being and that is the dominant culture. He who writes history, he or she who has the power gets to write the story, right, and gets to continually push that story out. There's no room for that narrative.

So my hope is that through the work that I do, particularly with Seneca Village and other related communities that it's like bringing people to the table and giving everybody an

equal spot. That's my way of being and thinking and it's Pollyannaish, I know, but I just have this desire and I strive and I aspire for parity. I can envision a different world where we can all sit at the table and have an equal—there's nothing wrong with having an equal place at the table and that makes us rich, that makes us who we are, that helps us to understand each other so much better.

When we think about Seneca Village, I'm not the only one who's done work on Seneca Village. There is a huge team of individuals who come at it from different disciplines, who come at it from different ethnicities and different interests but the thing is we're all excited and enthusiastic about the possibility of finding out more and helping to tell a better, richer story.

So first you have the secondary sources, talking about people who lived in this place that became Central Park, who got kicked off the land and they just gleefully left so that this thing could be created. They were all squatters and they were tramps and they just didn't belong there. And then here come Betsy [Elizabeth S.] Blackmar and Roy [A.] Rosenzweig and they're like, "You know what, we can't imagine 1,600 people just up and leaving and saying, 'Okay, bye,' without there being a fight or some kind of a struggle." We've all been kind of committed to these secondary sources. What happens when we go back to the primary sources and kind of like really look at that stuff and see what's really happening there? So I tip my hat off to the late Roy Rosenzweig and Betsy because they raised those questions.

Again, I'd seen footnotes in places along the way and I was definitely like that's a curious thing. It was also one of these times in New York City when the African Burial Ground down in lower Manhattan was reemerging and coming into the mainstream media as a place that was a hidden history and Five Points and those horrible stories about all those dirty people, Irish and blacks, miscegenation and all that kind of stuff. They were just living a life that was—it wasn't a respectable life. It was more about selling tabloids by creating these crazy stories about brawls and sex and rock and roll going on down there, the Nineteenth Century.

There were other stories that were emerging about so-called marginalized people in history that had been interpreted in the past all over the country. I don't know if it's timing. I don't know if it's the ancestors saying, "Hey, there's some folks out there who are now kind of doing this social history stuff. Time for us to push it up." But I am grateful that I was there at the moment to be a part of these various teams that started to think about these communities and to take the responsibility to try to dig and find out a little bit more about what the truth happened to be.

So I feel that it was bequeathed to me to be able to take on that role and timing is everything. Diana [diZerega] Wall who's an urban archaeologist and was a professor at City College, she just recently retired, and Nan [A.] Rothschild, the two of them are just these incredible women. It does take women, I must say, *[laughs]* to get out there and start to dig a little bit more to find different kinds of stories to see different kinds of truths in what is being revealed.

So lucky for me, I was able to connect with them, having had the experience of creating—co-curating an exhibition with my colleague Grady [T.] Turner when I was at the New York Historical Society and we were able to create an exhibition that kind of stumped New Yorkers. They were like, "Wait a second, I'm a New Yorker. I'm supposed to know all this stuff. How come I didn't know it?" You'd get people who were angry and frustrated because they think that they know history and then something—the myths have been shattered. History is demystified. They're like, "Well, why didn't I think about that? It's great that this story is being told. Can you do more? Can you do more?" Once these little things are revealed, somebody else comes along, from the community board or at the time, State Senator David [A.] Paterson was excited and interested about this story, Doug [Douglas] Blonsky who was at the time part of the Parks Department [New York City Department of Parks and Recreation]. He went on to become the president of the Central Park Conservancy.

All these folks started to say, "What did you find when you were walking along the path in this area where you call Seneca Village and you just surface searched and you found clay pipes and you found glass and ceramic? What are you telling me about this? You sure you weren't out there digging with a shovel?" You're like, "No, no, this stuff was kind of pushed up in the earth after rain in these spaces." We collected these things and we tried to interpret them to see if they dated to the period of Seneca Village. So they did. It's just through the historical documentation because you've got to look at the historical

record first. So you look at the newspapers, you look at the maps, you look at the title deeds, you look at family papers.

You just kind of piece that together, okay, so this is telling an interesting story. How can we bolster this story? How can we make this a little bit more—how can we humanize it a little bit more? Through the census, you put it together with names on the map.

You see in the census in the Nineteenth Century, the 1830, 1840, 1855 New York census, these names that are just amazing names. One person who lived in this place called Seneca Village was Freeborn Holiday *[phonetic]*. Freeborn Holiday, when you look at the census records, there's columns and the columns state for ethnicity and it's either B for black or M for mulatto but interesting, no W for white. So if the space is empty, it's presumed that it's a white person. But clearly we're collecting data and information about those black and mulatto people. That has to be noted here. And there's also a column to find out if you're going to be a nuisance to the city. So they want to know if you're deaf, dumb, blind or insane.

So there's all these interesting categories that that in and of itself tells you an amazing story. Then you kind of sort of piece it together and you see who's telling what. You go to the church records because there were churches involved in this community of Seneca Village and luckily Episcopalians have—they understand about record-keeping and they're the only ones that we can go to. I am Episcopalian so I'm talking about my people *[laughs]*.

But All Angels' Church had an affiliation in Seneca Village. They had a church where they were supposed to be taking care of—it was like a missionary church because there were riff raff there and they had to teach these people how to be. But All Angels' Church has in their, under lock and key, they have their registrar of the sacraments that were being administered in this place called Seneca Village where the colored inhabitants live. It is one of the only contemporary references we have to this place being called Seneca Village.

We take it as gospel because—no pun intended but we take it as gospel because the rector of the community at that time, Thomas McClure Peters, was physically there with these people and keeping track of the marriages and the baptisms and the deaths and the births and also indicating what the community is like. Who's supporting these people? Who's bearing witness to these sacraments that are being administered in these places?

So you find that there are black people and white people working with one another as the community which originally started off primarily as an African American community but eventually you have German people living there and you certainly have the Irish who are coming in later in the Nineteenth Century with no place to go because people despise the Irish. In fact, the Irish are seen as worse than African-Americans and are depicted and written up as being in common with hogs and goats. When you see drawings of the Irish in the publications of the time period, they're drawn as gorillas and apes with arms

hanging low on the ground, overextended lower jaws and things of that sort, really derogatory, nasty ways of presenting them.

But here in this community, you have the sense of a self-determined, self-sustaining community that seems to be a caring community. We have identified Margaret Geery as one of the midwives in the community. She's an Irish woman and she's helping to give birth to black and white children who are living in this community.

So when you're looking at the story of Seneca Village and seeing how there's connections and correlations to how communities exist today in New York City and all over the country, these were people in the Nineteenth Century trying to make a way out of no way, trying to care for one another, trying to see the beauty in one another. At least that's how it appears on paper and then through some of the objects that we uncovered, because through a lot of hard work and diligence and it really is because Diana and Nan were—because I was ready to give it up after awhile. But they just had the notes; slow and steady wins the race, not going to let the bureaucracy wear us down. We would ask for permission to be able to explore and to basically create a research design.

This took about fifteen years, twelve to fifteen years. I know you want to have kind of a timeline of what happened but I'm going to go back a little bit. When I became a part of the New York Historical Society, I was an education curator and one of the things that we wanted to do was expose young people to history and get them excited and get them thinking like historians, help them to develop critical thinking skills.

As a do-ee *[phonetic]*, I think it's really important for children to be able to do. That's the best kind of learning. They learn by doing, that feeling of experience is what kind of enters—I think play-space learning, being in spaces allows for authentic experiences, that hand to brain to doing to building to writing, not necessarily always on a computer. They didn't always have computers—computers were under development certainly when we were in the early phases of Seneca Village. But the education department thought that they would target middle school kids to expose them to this experience of learning about this place.

The design of the project was kind of underway when I first came there but as my colleagues and I kind of looked at it and reshaped what these experiences could be and what we could pull together to really make sure that kids were getting the gist of this and get excited about history. We were able to basically set them up on a journey and we kind of presented it as a detective kind of story. So we never really revealed what this place was.

This was in the late '90s, mid to late '90s. And because Roy and Elizabeth Blackmar were doing their research at various repositories in the city but they were finding lots of material at the New York Historical Society in our collections. We would find things, they would find things, send it back to us and we figured, oh, there's an interesting story, an interesting way to put this together. So we did a pilot program with some students in a school in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and they would come in. The school committed—

seventh graders committed to come to the historical society on a weekly basis, for an extended period of let's say six weeks or so. Each week, the kids would be exposed to a different aspect of historiography, if you will.

So the first thing they may have looked at, maybe they were looking at newspaper articles and they were trying to figure out what they were understanding. These stories talked about this place and the making of Central Park and so on and so forth. Then they would look at maps the next week. We'd bring out these big maps and they'd try to connect the articles to the maps, kind of see if they could build some kind of a narrative of sorts. Then we found photographs and illustrations and they would look at those things and try again to connect the dots. Then we would find other ephemera that kind of help to support and help them build this narrative.

Once they were able to sort of figure out that it had something to do with the park, the reveal was kind of made that there was this place and we would go and take a walk into the park and we would map it out. We'd bring twine and string and use our feet as measurements because you would find twenty-two by forty size spaces in some of the documents that we found. The students, the kids really took incredible ownership of not only the story and the care of the people as names of individuals were being revealed to them but they also found the primary sources to be very precious.

So they would say, “Put those over there. Be careful how you handle that. You can only use pencil in the library. Don’t bring those pens in here.” It was just really great to be able to be able to have that kind of impact on children and get them excited.

And then to the point where like five years later, one day I was walking down the street and this kid, no longer in the seventh grade, it was probably twelfth grade, he walks down the street and he was like, “I know you. You’re that Seneca Village lady.” We had a little bit of a conversation and it was great to understand that he really understood it and it stuck with him and he knew the story and he was trying to follow up on it. Anything happening with that? So you make that kind of impact.

Fast forward to the fact that we, my colleagues and I were bringing out these primary sources a lot and they’re starting to wear and tear, so we thought, hmm, maybe we can create an exhibition around this? Well, we only have maps and dead white men in frames, portraits of New Yorkers who were really kind of pushing the need to create the park. What else can we find?

But once we put it out there, it was like manna from heaven. Stuff just started coming at us in different directions. We found more portraits and illustrations. We found a map that actually had the names of individuals that we didn’t know was in our collection, that helped us to understand, oh, this is why these people are there. From there, these names on the map, we could connect to the census records. Then we could find out for sure

these were actually black folk and white folk and they actually owned their property. They weren't squatters. So it was just telling a different kind of story.

So we had this exhibition that was up from, I think, 1999 and it was supposed to be up for a couple of months and it just kept getting extended and extended because people were just so fascinated with the story. Then doing professional developments with teachers. Teachers were really excited and inspired by the story. So giving teachers the tools to be able to try to replicate these kinds of experiences for their students in their classrooms and of course, they could come to us and we'd give them the Seneca Village tour but go out and explore your city, know where you live kind of thing. People sort of took the bait with that and then one thing just led to another. The community got involved. They were just like, "Oh my God, I love this story. What more can we do?"

My colleagues, Diana and Nan and they came into the conversation because I was out with some teachers and as I said, these objects kind of came to us. They were collecting them. I was trying to document where they came from but the teachers were having none of it. They just wanted to collect it. So they collected these things and I sent it to Nan and Diana—Diana actually at the City University [of New York] and her field school students did the cleaning and washing and cataloging.

Then we just decided let's form a partnership. Let's see what we can do and wouldn't it be great if we could do an excavation in Central Park. Wouldn't that just be the cat's meow? But it takes vision to be able to do that because a lot of people would just stop at

that. Okay, we do the exhibition, we wrote the curriculum, maybe somebody will write a book, end of story. But we wanted to push it and push it. And so, it is really—like I said, I give total credit to them for pushing forward because they're archaeologists. They understand how you go through that process. So we did electromagnetometry first.

Of course, we had to partner with the—we had to build relationships. You always have to build relationships with those who have the power and control of spaces. So we worked with the New York City Parks Department, Parks and Recreation. We worked with the Central Park Conservancy, told them what we were doing. They were a little skeptical at first but they understood. They were also curious and so they worked with us, giving us the permits so that we could first do the electromagnetometry to see if we could find evidence of anomalies beneath the surface. This is after we had done some mapping and tried to figure out, oh, there was a structure here. There was a structure here. Maybe there was a cistern over here. Maybe we'll find a space where people would eventually have used to dump their garbage, et cetera. So let's kind of focus on those spaces.

We sort of did some ground truthing, the evidence, working with geophysicists. They were able to interpret the pulses that came back to the ground and suggested we look in certain areas. There were like five areas that were identified. Then we brought in a soil specialist and she helped us do some preliminary work with soil coring and trying to determine the stratigraphy and if we could find the original soil because building the park, they built a landfill. Where did the soils come from? So if there's a possibility, what was the topography like in this particular section of what became Central Park?

We had to do all that work and then we would go back out and we would do more investigation, surveying of the land and so on and so forth. We did this with the help of—we got little grants and we invited college and university students who were not necessarily interested in archaeology but might be interested in the sciences. We were particularly interested in trying to encourage women, people of color to apply for these internships and we got a couple of—I think the first one was in—oh gosh, was it—I'm sorry, I looked these things up but then I can't remember the dates.

Q1: I have some dates. I think the group—the Seneca Village Project was formed in 2001.

Copeland: Right.

Q1: The dig didn't happen until 2011.

Copeland: That's correct.

Q1: So you figure somewhere between these dates.

Copeland: So I think the first group of students that we had out in the park was around 2003 or '04 and we went out and we did some preliminary work. The students also looked at family configurations, because we know that some families adopted other

members of families who lived in this place called Seneca Village. What was that like? Is it possible that Seneca Village was used as an underground railroad space and they were hiding individuals and protecting freedom seekers? How do you do geophysics? What is that process?

So students were doing research while they were actually having experiences working in the field. Then we had an open house. The students had their poster projects and we invited people out and they explained what was going on, which gave it even more interest.

Also in 2001, one thing that we did do immediately was we wanted to acknowledge that this site existed. So there was this effort to try to get some signage in the park. In order to do that, you had to go through the bureaucracy of the Central Park Conservancy and the Parks Department. It wasn't that easy to get it done but we were finally able to get a sign erected and that was in 2001. There was a big—Black History Month, of course. We had a big event and put the sign up and people came out. It was very exciting to be able to have that.

Then moving forward, after we did all this preliminary work and we're working and writing reports and reporting back to the powers-that-be, we really wanted to do—we felt we were getting enough information to be able to do an excavation.

The Parks Department and the Conservancy allowed for us to do it but it came with some criteria. We had to make sure that we had a guard on the site, twenty-four hours. If we were digging on a Friday, if we hadn't finished our test pit, we would have to fill it back up and cover it with plywood and put gating around it, fencing around it and then come back on Monday and take it all out and start all over again. We had to obviously keep them in the loop, just all kinds of this and that. And we said, yes, we can do it. Check, check, check.

I think they were actually surprised that we were able to do it but we were able and we had a limited amount of test pits that we could do but we determined those areas. Again, it was a different call, as a competitive process, to bring in students who might be interested in learning more about archaeology and actually doing the excavations.

So we had students from City College, we had students from NYU [New York University], we had students from Barnard [College], we had students from Fordham [University]. I think we ended up with eleven students and some associate directors, co-directors, and we were out there from late June of 2011 until July. We uncovered just an enormous amount of objects, material culture, that was just so exciting to help to tell the story a little bit better. We've just finished categorizing, inventorying the objects. For a while they were held at the lab at City College but now they are at the new laboratory, the New York City lab, the Nan Rothschild Archaeological Lab on Forty-Seventh Street and they're housed there because those items belong to the city. This new laboratory is the

repository for excavations that have happened in the urban space within, I'd say, the last twenty, thirty years, something like that.

It's just exciting to be able to have them housed in this particular space. We're still finding out information about them. The things were sent over but they have a small team that are looking to continue with the research and continue to find the stories that will tell a better story about the people who lived in that community.

Q1: Is there another exhibit in the works as these things get sifted through?

Copeland: *[Laughs]* I think we have to wait until—there's a lot of stuff. So maybe there will be an exhibition. I don't know where it will be. Maybe it will be at the Museum of the City of New York or maybe it will be at the Historical Society. Who knows where it can end up? Maybe it can be at the Dana Center [Charles A. Dana Discovery Center] or up at the Mirror *[phonetic]* in Central Park. There have been many exhibitions in libraries—City College after we had our exhibition, we put together a mini exhibition for the students over at City College, or anybody. It was open to the public in the library, to be able to go over and see things. We have developed a website.

While we were in the field, we documented our process and we're trying to raise money so that we can make that documentary so that people can know what happened and what the process was like. We have a little trailer that we've made. It's a volunteer organization. Everybody's sort of all over the place trying to make a living and trying to

do the best that they can. So these things do take a lot of time and it's a labor of love for sure, but it is something that sustains our interests. We continue to give tours. We continue to talk about it.

We continue to do research because at the moment, in all honesty, we did focus on telling the African-American story of Seneca Village because that is the essence of the community but there is no story without the others who were there. So we still have to look into the Irish community and we have to look into the Germans and do a better job of trying to find out information about those folks and integrating that into the story. So this is definitely a lifelong project *[laughs]*. Here I thought it was just going to be a little curriculum and taking kids out. It's just like no, my name is Seneca *[laughter]*. So it's that kind of thing.

Q1: Well, you said upwards of fifteen years until you finally got to break ground, what was it like for you to see things and start finding not just surface items but foundations, wells, whatever it was that you found?

Copeland: It was just remarkable. It goes back to my time on Governors Island, being able to sort of appreciate history and that which is beneath the surface and knowing there's another story. And again, as an African-American, where the African-Americans are in the diaspora, well, so are their stories. So is their stuff and their stuff is everywhere. It's underground, it's in attics, it's in pieces. It's not in a neat little box with family papers and this happened and I can tell you all of this and you can just go to one space.

That is true—I also worked on the African Burial Ground project and finding those bones and finding the objects that were associated with some of the burials. These stories, they're just all over the place. It takes a lot of patience and perseverance and good people who are committed to telling these stories and finding these reveals.

The biggest find was the foundation for one of the houses. The sexton who took care of the items and the church, All Angels' Church, lived in that house, William Godfrey Wilson and there were nine members in this house. If you had listened to the old narratives of the newspapers where it was all about tramps, squatters and thieves and then you looked at maps that revealed it was a two-story framed house and it had a basement. When we went down, we found all these bricks that had fallen in and just lain. We kind of think it was the kitchen, where the hearth area was. There were all these bricks which we kept pulling up and finding.

We found the sole of a shoe with some leather on the tail end. When that shoe came out of the space, I think a number of us were kind of moved to tears. There was a moment of silence because this was like, wow, somebody's foot was in that shoe. This is like real evidence and it was tiny. So was it the shoe of a child or was it a shoe of a young woman with a small foot? We don't know who it belonged to but it was there and it was preserved.

We found sheep bone and we found a fish bone. We found a piece of—a toothbrush holder. You name it, we found it. It was just amazing and so moving. The historical record is a wonderful thing and it gives us information, it gives us names. But when you find the stuff people were using, it just really—that's what humanizes these people. They touched it, they felt it.

If they had CSI [Crime Scene Investigation] back in the day, we could brush for fingerprints and put it in some kind of a bank and pull up a photo of somebody who actually lived. We can't do that but we can imagine. We can say with good confidence and pretty much one hundred percent accuracy that these things on this space belonged to these people. We have all this evidence from the historical record, the documentation to the material culture, to you looking down into the ground, into the earth and seeing what was revealed.

When we dug down, we didn't go that far down. I mean most of us were standing up in these pits, four feet, five feet. We were able to reveal quite an enormous amount in just very select spaces. If we had full range of—full access to a ginormous range of the entire area, my god, who knows what we could have revealed? But you know, you got to—*[laughs]*—things have to be controlled and we recognized that.

I think that was also one of the concerns of the Parks Department how responsible will you be doing this. I suppose a lot of people, the Seneca Villagers weren't the only ones, people living there. There was lots of people who had—there was Harsonville *[phonetic]*,

Jupiterville. There was the convent, the Sisters of Charity *[phonetic]* in the northern region. There were lots of different family neighborhoods, houses, et cetera. People could say, well, I know my people were buried there. I want to do a dig; I want to do a dig. You could just see how it could be very disruptive and archaeology is disruptive. We know that. It is one of these things that once you go in, you're disturbing the natural order of the way things were.

So it's not—it has to be controlled chaos in a sense. But once you pull things out, they don't ever go back the way they came out. So that is disturbance and it's important for people to understand that. But when it's intentional, when there's a purpose, when it's really truly guided and directed with goals in mind of telling great reveals; that's a different story. That's why archaeology is so important, so respected and what I really appreciate, indeed.

Q1: You mentioned the rediscovery of the African-American Burial Ground downtown and I know you weren't looking at any of the grounds that had been cemeteries up in Seneca Village but I was wondering if you could sort of compare the experiences of archaeology in places where you expect to find human remains and archaeology in places where you don't because it is a disruption and there is a certain level of respect that's required for these histories and these memories. But I'm sure they were still very different experiences.

Copeland: They were different experiences indeed and I think that the rediscovery of the African Burial Ground down in Lower Manhattan was so important to people who—to the descendent community who have fought for so long to prove that there was an early African presence here in New York and here in what has become the United States. And that through physical archaeology and anthropology, you bring in these archaeologists and anthropologists who can study the wear and tear of the bones and extract DNA to help to show, wow, this particular burial came from this part of Africa or this part of the Caribbean or wherever they came from. This helps to give name and place and space to people who have been told for centuries that they have no history.

That's why the African Burial Ground rediscovery and the work that was done on it was so important and so revealing. In Seneca Village, there were burials. We know that the churches that were affiliated with that community had burials. We were expecting to find burials but we were hoping to not find them because they are sacred and we did not want to disturb them. But that is why with doing the ground-penetrating radar and all, reveals shapes and the significance and the possibilities. We actually did find evidence of seven burial shafts. There was an area where it looks like there were seven, sort of, coffin-shaped spaces and so we didn't disturb those at all. In fact, whenever we go there, particularly during the excavation, we actually had a little bit of a libation ceremony and we kind of sprinkled water on the earth and called out names.

We don't know that those were names of individuals who were there certainly but in doing our research to find out about the burials in that area and looking at the record and

seeing who was buried there and there were indeed some people from Seneca, names appeared on the list. But we don't know if these seven—but they are there. We wanted to make sure that it was acknowledged by the Parks Department because even when they're laying down utility lines and things of that sort, they need to know, they could possibly disturb and disrupt a site burial.

So there is that connection. The story of African people, people of African heritage is that they're buried in potter's fields; they're buried in spaces near their homes. They're buried wherever they're given permission to be buried. I mentioned All Angels' Church as being the main Episcopal church that is there which is also part of this Episcopal parish called St. Michael's [Episcopal Church]. So it's St. Michael's and All Angels'. St. Michael's Church is also in the upper regions of the Upper West Side on Ninety-Ninth [Street] and Broadway. But there was also the African Union Church was there, and the African Methodist Episcopal [AME] Zion Church Branch Militant was in Seneca Village as well. That is a church that still exists today as Mother [African Methodist Episcopal] Zion Church in Harlem on 136th and 137th Streets.

We were able to connect with clergy and the congregation that was there and in fact, a member of their church was on our advisory board. Unfortunately, he has since passed but he was just instrumental in helping us learn about whatever church history we had and a former reverend of the church, Gregory [R.] Smith, he was also very supportive of the work that we did.

When we would have advisory committee meetings, they would offer their space to us to meet and in fact, that church was celebrating their bicentennial when we were curating the exhibition at the New York Historical Society and I just happened to be there one day and there was this charcoal drawing of one of the trustees that owned the land in Seneca Village and lived in Seneca Village. And it was one of those hair-raising, goosebump moments. It was just crazy. I couldn't believe that I was looking at Levin Smith who went on to become this incredible orator and moved to Rhode Island and was part of the AME Zion Church circuit.

It's stuff like that just started to happen at the time. It's like you put it out in the universe, and the universe says, "Okay, you go over here, you're going to find this. If you go here, surprise." So it was really a delight to be able to make those discoveries and have the connections.

As we continued to research the story of Seneca Village, we're trying to find actual members of the descendant community. We have Carla [L.] Peterson who wrote *Black Gotham: [A Family History of African American's in Nineteenth Century New York City]*. She has a connection to a lot of elite African-Americans in New York at that time period and she has not a direct connection but a connection to one of the families that lived in Seneca Village and then ultimately—they were the Lyons family, Albro Lyons and Maritcha Lyons. There's a kids' book—no, the daughter was Maritcha. What was the wife's name? I'm sorry, I can't remember.

But anyway, Albro Lyons is the father and they had Native American heritage and African-American heritage and they owned property in Seneca Village. I'm not sure that they actually lived in Seneca Village. They may have owned the land but rented it out. He was also the head of one of these—think, think, think—the seafaring houses. There's one down in Lower Manhattan. It's kind of near Mother Seton's [St. Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton] space. It's called the—oh, gosh; it's like the Merchant's Marines—

Q1: Snug Harbor.

Copeland: Seafaring—not Snug Harbor, down in Lower Manhattan, it's like the Merchant Marines—

Q2: Seamen's—

Copeland: Yes, yes, Seamen's [Church] Institutes, thank you. So they had a Seamen's Institute but it was on the—like around Gold Street where we are today in that section. Then his family was attacked during the draft riots and they had to leave and they went over to Weeksville. They have a connection to the community of Weeksville, which is another community of African-American folks that got established in the 1830s named after James Weeks and is still in existence today. They found four extant houses and it's now been reinterpreted to speak to various periods in history.

So anyway, Carla Peterson has connections to those folks in Weeksville but it's not a direct connection. But my colleagues, Nan and Diana gave an interview recently. I think it was late last year and it looks like a descendant in the Lyons family actually contacted the reporter who was from Ireland, I think. It was an Irish paper. That person, the descendant is living in Switzerland—Switzerland or Sweden—and heard this story, read the story or heard the podcast.

So we're now trying to contact, connect and figure out and look, but we are in a search, we're on a hunt to try to find direct descendants who are connected to this story because again, it's just one of those things that will humanize and put a nice punctuation mark, an exclamation at the end of the story.

Q1: To go from the shoe which is evidence of a person to a portrait of a person, of course you're trying to look for some kind of living memory of where did these people go and how did it all end up. That's so fascinating.

Copeland: Yes, it really, really is. So that's the journey we're on at the moment *[laughs]*.

Q1: You mentioned Weeksville and I remember reading that in 2003 you did some research for them as well. Can you tell me a little about that?

Copeland: Oh gosh *[laughs]*. Yes, I can tell you. So Weeksville has such an exciting—it's an exciting community because it's a neighborhood and people still kind of refer to

this space in Brooklyn in sort of the Bedford-Stuyvesant/Crown Heights area as a space that has this great history. But again, in the 1950s, ’60s, it went through a period of demise as a lot of the communities, black communities in the city were neglected. That’s a nice way of putting it. They were neglected. But I guess I’m kind of this sort of public historian who gets plucked—yes because people see similarities. There’s a reveal. You can do archaeology. You can do the historical story. You can find that oh, this person in Seneca Village knew this person over in Weeksville because they were fighting for suffrage for the rights for African-American males all over the country to be able to vote and specifically in New York.

Then you have education stories. Then you’ve got religious stories and they’re all interconnected. Everybody is just trying to—in the Nineteenth Century black New York, people are trying so hard to uplift the race and make sure that African-Americans are treated as citizens.

So it could be considered a romantic period. It could be considered a period of true unity, where people were just so united across rank, because again, we know that there are fair-skinned African-Americans who maybe get better breaks than darker-skinned African-Americans. That was true back in the Nineteenth Century. It’s true today. Fair-skinned African-Americans maybe have more advances and you may see them in more executive positions today. That was true back then. That is true today.

But at the same time, back in the Nineteenth Century, that may have been the case but people were fighting for everyone. Nobody was left behind. They were taking care of one another. So it's a really interesting period for people to look at if you want to look at communities working together for the better good.

I was asked to work on these various projects at Weeksville because Weeksville was in the process of—Joan Maynard was the director and she passed and then Pam [Pamela] Green came along as the executive director [ED]. Pam Green was an amazing—but Joan was amazing and then this new ED Pam Green came along. Where Joan was responsible for laying the foundation and making things possible, bringing in the community to—once they found those houses, she presented and created programming and education and got the Boy Scouts to go to the [New York City] Landmarks Preservation [Commission] to say these houses are important and we want you to preserve them. You need to landmark these.

So she was the catalyst behind all of that to get the community to understand the significance of place and the past. So that was done and then she passed and Pam Green came along before Joan passed away. Pam and the board and the community said, "Well, we've got this but we need to do more." So the houses were being restored. Then it's like, we need a museum. We need a center in this space. That will bring so much more to this community, so much pride to this community. So they raised money and they were able to build a brand-new museum, which is really lovely.

My role in all that was to help to do research so that we could get landmark status so we could better understand how the people were in the community, that so we could try to figure out time periods, who really—were there African-Americans who really owned these spaces and really built these spaces? In Seneca Village, there were German people and so on and so forth who were in this community and working with another fantastic historian, Judith Wellman, we did a lot of research to try to just—that historical research was kind of missing from the earlier works. It was here in bits and pieces but there wasn't a cohesive comprehensive collection of documents to help to tell the story a little bit better. So I was part of that team to help them do that.

Q1: What was that like? How did it compare to having access to the archives at the New York Historical Society? Was it much more piecing things together or—?

Copeland: Yes, it was definitely piecing things together because at the Historical Society, the collections are already established. They're there. You just have to have the wherewithal to get through and ask the right questions and go to the right family papers or look at the right maps or have the right terminology. And you can look it up and you can eventually find those items. In addition, they were supplemented by the church records and the census records at the Bureau of Old Records in New York City [New York City Department of Records and Information Services] and so on and so forth. But at Weeksville, a lot of what they have is—they may have copies of things that exist in other people's collections and it doesn't actually belong to them.

So it was that. We were able to establish wonderful bibliographies for the community. They also had done a community archaeological excavation. So they have lots of material culture, not just from the area in front where the four houses stand but in a place that eventually became the Weeksville Garden Apartments. So it's offsite but it's still a part of the Weeksville community. So there was that.

It was similar, the process, and of course, we don't have everything. But what made it easier for us to also identify things, was it was a little bit later and the Internet was there. So we were able to do a lot of our searches online and to find newspaper articles. *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* provided us with a lot of information, going to the city records and trying to find title deeds and the maps and things of that sort. We were able to collect, make copies, take photographs, make copies of the photographs, et cetera and try to put them together.

Pam Green has retired from the community and there was another executive director who was there. Her name was Tia [Powell] Harris but unfortunately she had a family situation in Washington, D.C., so she just recently left. So they are now on their fourth ED, which is—people really stick with the project for years at a time. But unfortunately as people leave, so does the historical memory. New people come in. So they're currently working with a brand-new staff. I have been asked to kind of come over and try to help a little bit.

But another problem or challenge with these kinds of histories that are so important and so rich and tell the stories, they require lots of money, lots of funding. Because you have

these very small communities and these small spaces and these tiny places, it's not the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art]. It's not MOMA [Museum of Modern Art]; it's not the Whitney [Museum of American Art]. It's not Morris-Jumel Mansion—it's not where there are a lot of people who have money to support it. So funding is always an issue and it is unfortunate. But Weeksville staff is there. It's sized down. They're on furlough, reduced hours but they do a lot for the community. They're trying to rely on the community. They have the Kingsborough Houses. Those are public housing communities across the street. They're trying to help the folks in those communities to know that this space is yours. This is meant for you.

They've been trying to do innovative programming by having community gardens, having children come over and plant and harvest vegetables and herbs and things in the garden. Last week, they had a wonderful project where they had a photographer go into the housing project and they sort of designed—created a set so that portraits could be taken of family members in this kind of space, to try to help them to see, please come over. This is for you. I understand that they had a really good turnout and it was really lovely.

They've had some interesting programming over the years. But it's these moment-by-moment events when they get money to do these great things. So they're trying to build it up so they can truly sustain it. It was an incredible effort. I don't know what the dollar amount was to actually build the museum, but its one thing to build a museum. You still have to keep fundraising to keep it going and that's what they're working on right now.

Q1: From your perspective, this challenge of funding, like as a oral historian, I also recognize this, it really hinges on funding moment to moment and funding will come and go. Does it feel like a race against time trying to find these artifacts and these memories or is there—have you developed ways of putting things on pause and holding them so if there is a changeover, people can sort of pick up where you left off? I mean what advice do you have for that kind of environment and that kind of work?

Copeland: It's the latter. I do believe that it's that sort of you pick and choose, you write those grants. You try to envision where you'd like to be and what you'd like to have and you kind of keep your fingers crossed. As more and more people are exposed to this space—they have their galas. They tap into the awards situation where you try to get people to buy those tables who will help to—but sometimes that just covers the cost of the gala and there's just a couple thousand left to do some programming.

You tap into the city agencies to see what you can get, any federal grants although that's kind of challenging right now and highly competitive. Then you just hope that maybe through Kickstarter and all these social media, there are a lot of different avenues for doing that, but I think that these kinds of institutions really require savvy development officers who just are connected, who know the landscape and know the different ways in which to create the funding sources to keep it going.

There is no one person who can do every single thing but if you have a really smart executive who can do that or a team, you can bring in consultants perhaps. You find the money to be able to have that group be something that's sustainable and can create and do that for you. Then maybe you'll be able to move things through. But right now it's all about marketing and branding, getting your name out there and that's the only way people know who you are.

But when you bring people through, for example, I just brought some students from Bank Street [Graduate School of Education] to Weeksville the other day and they were just, "Oh my God, this is such a great place. How come people don't know more about this?" I said, "Well, that's your job. Why don't you come up with a plan to help people know about this?" So they were given assignments to try to think of what kind of programming and that's what we have to, sadly and shamelessly rely on, exploiting interns and university students to come up with ideas. But it's a win-win situation for everyone. I think that we know that's how the world operates right now. But that's what we have to do.

Q1: With Seneca Village, you don't have a development office. You have three or more of you who have been involved in a really sustained way over time. So I'm curious, how are you passing your records, your research, the knowledge in this project forward? What happens if these powerful personalities have to step down or a number of things? What's the future of it? What's the plan?

Copeland: Well, again, the story kind of began with the New York Historical Society so they have a study guide. They have an idea. They're not as committed to it because that's not their mission. That's not their focus and it's just something that they did along the way. But the record exists there. We've had media coverage. So it's there and newspapers and podcasts and things of that sort, so people can find it by Googling it, I suppose. We have students who have worked on the project in do-ee form. They've done it and it's become a part of their mission. They advocate for it, they promote it. They're not necessarily there to sustain it and keep it going.

And we have this laboratory now, the New York City Laboratory where hopefully—I mean as I said, I took my students to the lab as well, these Bank Street students. We went to the lab and the director there was like maybe we can kind of figure out some kind of a partnership. So maybe we can have like a formalized partnership with the Museum Studies program at Bank Street or some education or a history department at a university and kind of keep it going that way. But I do think it's going to have to come through an educational space or institution of sorts to try to keep it—one preferably that understands research and what that's all about and one that can get grants to go out and have these special projects. That's the way—maybe the Central Park Conservancy or the Parks Department. They have taken it on and they do create little walking tours. So it is available in that sense to tell the story.

But in terms of the continued research, it's just a matter of people who are interested, our intrinsic motivations, our ability to do our choice learning, it's really up to us. Some

people stumble upon it. Some children stumble upon it and get really connected to it and want to do something about it. But I do hope that it could be formalized and that there could be some sort of a mini institution where there are a handful of people who are truly—not necessarily gatekeepers but kind of just keeping the memory alive so that we can continue to pass it on, pass it on, pass it on. So people know that this was a really significant and important place.

Q1: Yes. What about your own records, just of the preservation effort? Do you have a plan for moving those forward or saving them somewhere?

Copeland: I mean it's a yes and no response again. When you're working as a volunteer and you're cobbling your life together, and you've got so many other people who are truly interested in all these things, we're worked with the Landmarks Preservation Commission. They are aware of this space and so much of the story, I think, is going to have to be preserved at the lab.

Thankfully social media is helping us to sort of build websites to build these kinds of stories. If we are ever able to get the documentary made, that can be something that serves as a form of historic preservation if you will. Central Park is always going to be there. It is preserved. It is a historic site. It would be so fantastic if we could get the pre-park history landmarked, so that the area could never be disturbed in any way.

One of the things that when this Seneca Village Advisory Committee was established—that included bringing my colleagues, Diana and Nan, myself, students, Community Board members, members of the church. There were about twenty, thirty people, some historians who were interested. Our goal was to educate, to strive and aspire for an excavation and to commemorate. We understand that the beauty of the park is its natural beauty, the naturalness of it all. So in terms of how could we commemorate without disturbing and disrupting the park, one of the things that we looked for and we did find original ground soil in one of the areas. So in collecting and the dirt and the soils and trying to have that analyzed, perhaps seeing what kind of flora and fauna were there at that time. Maybe we can have a commemorative garden that represents those items and ask to grow them. Then it would be in the spirit of the park.

We don't want just the typical traditional plaque or statue. That doesn't work for us. But something that would be really sort of a contemplative space where you could sit and meditate and kind of sit and breathe and smell and feel the ghosts of the people of Seneca Village. We think that could be a form of historic preservation and the best way to work within the park itself, which is already a landmark.

Q1: Wow. I'd love to get your thoughts on the world of historic preservation more generally. You've had this sort of relationship through public history with preservation movements in the city. So I'd love to get your thoughts on how are attitudes towards historic preservation changing over time. Who is getting landmarked now that maybe

wasn't getting landmarked before? Just whatever your thoughts are, I'd love to hear them.

Copeland: So I still think historic preservation is an enigma to many people. I think those of us who are in it, we're kind of considered zealots *[laughs]* because we're just so mad for it and so passionate. We just have to save because we understand the significance of these spaces but when you're competing against development and the developers who are in urban spaces, and it's sort of that amnesia is the way. You knock it down and then you build it up and you knock it down again and you build up something else. Those things just don't mean anything to people anymore.

I think the tensions are still there. I think the battle is still there. I think that with regard to what gets preserved, it's a matter of who's got the power, who's got the money and who's got the biggest fight and the ability to persevere, to make sure that these spaces are indeed landmarked. I think that in New York, for example, I think that there is a movement and people are starting to understand it a little bit more why it's important to try to preserve. But the ideas of preservation, of spaces, buildings and such now are just to keep the front edifice and to build within, tear everything else down and then just build within. Here, see, it's still there. Don't you like it? That's not historic preservation. That's just developers getting their way and just giving a nod to sort of move the preservationists out of the way.

So I am concerned about what's happening. Then I think up in Harlem what they're doing, just tearing down all kinds of spaces that are just so rich but again, it comes down to power, privilege and money and race. People are always like, "Why you bringing race into everything?" I say it's because you got to bring race into everything. You have to bring race, class and money. They're all interconnected so tightly and we really need to be honest and have these honest conversations about why things happen the way they do. But as the march for space continues and carries up into Manhattan, to northern Manhattan, through Harlem and all, there's a real battle. There's one person, Michael Henry Adams who will chain himself to spaces and get himself arrested and be the mouth and doesn't care what happens and I applaud him for being willing to take that risk and to take on that responsibility.

It's like everything else, you have to decide what is important. You have to prioritize and you have to decide how far can you actually go. A lot of people may have families and they're thinking about their families and I can't go to jail, I can't do this or that. So it's so complicated and so frustrating and I think people think about these things all the time.

But if you are ready, willing and able—I mean I'm so grateful for Arlene Simon and Landmark West!. When she started it, here she comes. She didn't let down, like a pit bull and bringing people along, often got what she needed to do but that's also part of the city that is—there's a lot of wealth. There's a lot of power, there's a lot of privilege. There's a lot of lawyers, there's a lot of support that can help to get those things done.

When you're in communities where that isn't available, it just goes away. You walk down spaces. One day, you walk down and the next day, it's gone. Then you're also thinking, wait a second—wasn't it over there? Wasn't it here? Where did it go? It goes back to understanding history, understanding what's important, being able to tell narratives. If you feel that there's a space that really deserves landmark status, you've got to be able to roll up your sleeves and get that evidence and really, really get the backing behind you to state your claim and just try to present and hope for the best.

Then I think about places in upstate New York where people really appreciate their little historic houses. There's like a bajillion historic houses in upstate New York, from place to place, and people just have a different sensibility about it. You can go into these spaces, and these little old communities with their little bake sales and this and that, it's just not as expensive to keep places running and operating. They have limited hours for you to go and see them but they do appreciate the significance of history in other spaces.

I just think in urban spaces where space is at a premium, people want to live. That tension is going to be there. But you still have to fight and if it's worth fighting for, at least people will know that you tried. You give it your best shot *[laughs]*. Then maybe you end up with a little front edifice and a Duane Reade on the corner or a Chase Bank—

Q1: Or a plaque.

Copeland: Or a TDB [TD Bank] or a plaque—that you can't even read *[laughs]* because it's so tiny or it's so dense, you don't want to read it *[laughs]*.

Q1: What advice do you have for people who don't have the money and the power, if they know they have something really special? I mean is it just elbow grease? What would you pass on?

Copeland: I think for those who do not have power, it is the elbow grease. I just think that it's doing your homework. It's being able to find those stories that are important and if you are savvy enough to use social media, get it out there, people will like your page or like your tweet, or put it up on Instagram, really use social media. Becoming a savvy media player is so important and finding organizations and people who are like-minded who can offer you advice and assistance, I think is what has to happen. And again as I said, you just keep trying and you try not to give up.

I mean I hate to use cute little children but sometimes little children get very passionate about spaces and places and they understand the significance of things and they're willing to march and write letters and do petitions and engage adults and try to teach adults. Just because you're an adult doesn't mean you're so knowledgeable about anything but you have to be open to listening to young people because we are—when older people are running things, we're going to be passing this on to them. And I think they deserve to have a voice. Youth community voice is very important.

We have cable access media that's available, if you can get on a channel and push your claim. Obviously writing to the city authorities and public government authorities, I think, is really important. It's that old-fashioned elbow grease, doing the letter writing, the phone tree, all of that stuff. We have to bring it all back and just be—not a nuisance but—*[laughs]*—vigilant, show that fortitude. Just live it, sleep it, drink it, eat it, talk it up. Talk to the wall. Talk to everybody because you never know who you're going to bump into who might be able to support your cause and take it on.

Q1: I think that's all the questions I have. What should I have asked you? Is there anything I missed?

Copeland: I don't think so *[Laughs]*. I feel like I've been just blah, blah, blah.

Q1: That's what we're here for.

Copeland: I mean I know that's oral history *[laughter]*. I know that's what it's about. No, just to sum it all up, I just think it's just important for people to appreciate spaces where they live. Somebody came before you, something came before you. Just be a little bit curious and find out a little bit about it. You might make a connection and establish a new kind of interest and you might make an incredible difference in somebody's life or a city's life or a neighborhood life. I just think more neighborhood historians that we have, more children that we bring into conversations, the more we work together for the greater

good to share our collective stories and to learn our collective stories and then to share them. I think it just makes us all the better.

Q1: Thank you so much. I learned a ton today. I really appreciate your time and your stories.

Copeland: You're welcome.

Q1: Thank you.

Copeland: You're welcome.

Q2: I told you it would be hard to get her to talk *[laughter]*.

[END OF INTERVIEW]