

UNCOVERING THE ROOTS OF LGBT PRESERVATION

The Reminiscences of

Gale Harris

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Gale Harris conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on October 24, 2019. This interview is part of the *Uncovering the Roots of LGBT Preservation* 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.

Transcriptionist: Matthew Geesey

Session: 1

Interviewees: Gale Harris

Location: Park Slope Library, Brooklyn, NY

Interviewer: Sarah Dzedzic

Date: October 24, 2019

Q: Today is October 24, 2019 and this is Sarah Dzedzic interviewing Gale Harris for the New York Preservation Archive Project. Can you just start by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Harris: I'm Gale Harris. I used to work at the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission [LPC]. I retired in 2017. Currently, I'm working as a consultant for the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project doing research on outer borough sites. We've done several in Brooklyn and now I'm working on ones in Staten Island.

Q: Thanks. Can you tell me a little bit about the place where you grew up?

Harris: I grew up in Philadelphia, in Wynnefield, which is sort of the northwest edge of the city, near City Line Avenue. It was close to the suburbs. I went to Penn State [Pennsylvania State University]. I knew I wanted to be an art historian when I was in high school. I majored in art history. I was initially planning on specializing in Italian Renaissance and baroque.

My senior year, I got asked to be part of the SoHo project that documented SoHo. I went an extra term—we were on the term system—so I was here for the summer of '71 I was in the SoHo project and I fell in love with the architecture of New York, doing research in New York City. So

then I switched. I went to graduate school working with Winston [R.] Weisman, who was a specialist in nineteenth-century New York architecture, and I ended up studying nineteenth-century architecture.

Then Dr. Weisman retired. I looked around for a program, started the PhD program in Delaware, and there were a whole bunch of family emergencies. I couldn't finish my degree. I ended up working for a brokerage firm for a while. Then I got together with friends for a Preservation League of New York meeting and Gina [Regina] Kellerman, who had been the first Director of Research at the Landmarks Commission, had been a graduate student at Penn State with me and had been working with Dr. Weisman. She had been sort of the project manager for the SoHo project.

I had been working on William Schickel. I had proposed that they designate the Century Building, which is the building that Barnes & Noble is in on Union Square. I had sort of gotten a turndown letter on that. So I said, "Gina, would you introduce me to her? I want to put in a plea." As I was talking about all that wonderful surviving detail, and that it still had its original storefronts, et cetera, Gina said, "You really should bring Gale to New York. She'd be wonderful." So Lenore Norman, who was then the executive director of the Commission, said, "You can send a resume."

So I did. I didn't expect that anything would happen. But about six months later, the Commission contacted me and said they were actually interviewing. I got the job because Barry Bergdoll, who had been with the Commission and had gone back to Columbia [University], decided he

wanted to stay teaching at Columbia, which probably was a very good decision for him. I was sort of their second choice. So I got the job. [Laughs]

Q: Wow. I want to go back a little bit and kind of understand a little bit more about Wynnefield and what it was like at the time. You said it was close to the suburbs. So can you explain that, kind of align what that looked like from an architectural standpoint?

Harris: Wynnefield had a lot of interesting—I lived in what was called a twin, it was post-war. But there were a lot of large 1920s and earlier, sort of single-family houses. It was sort of suburban in a way. There was one maybe seventeenth, eighteenth-century—the Wynne Mansion survived in the neighborhood. But there was a lot of historic architecture. So I grew up with historic architecture.

I can also remember growing up in Philadelphia and riding around City Hall, thinking that it was the most magical building in the world. Just sort of being in the back seat and falling in love with that building. I was one of those people that was always interested in history. Even as a teenager, when they had Germantown Day and you could go tour historic houses in Germantown. I used to like to go tour the historic houses at Fairmount Park, which was fairly close to Wynnefield also. I grew up interested in historic architecture. From a young age, it was sort of a good fit for me.

Q: And the art history interest. Can you explain that as well, the relationship of your art history interests to the architecture history?

Harris: You start by studying cultures all together. When I was in high school, the first time I went to the Philadelphia Museum [of Art], I went with a friend who was from New York and went to a fancy private school. She had to do a paper. We went to the Philadelphia Art Museum and I suddenly knew I was home. Through all my teen years, I would routinely ask for a membership to the museum as my birthday present. [Laughs] So I just was interested in art history. It just made sense to be interested in painting and sculpture and architecture because you're studying cultures and their various manifestations.

Q: Do you remember any artwork in particular at the Philadelphia Museum?

Harris: Of course. [Laughs]

Q: I mean, one that really got you. Sorry, too broad of a question. [Laughs] I ask because I grew up outside of Philadelphia and have a similar story.

Harris: I loved their period rooms. I love [Paul] Cézanne, and they have some knock-your-socks-off Cézannes. Then they had just some wonderful, wonderful paintings, their Italian Renaissance stuff. They just have terrific things.

Q: I think for me it was Cy Twombly and thinking, wow, what is this?

Harris: One of the things I did one summer was I did this thing for members—this was the summer between eleventh and twelfth grades—they had a thing where you could take classes in

art appreciation. I remember going through the modern stuff. I guess we were looking at the [Constantin] Brancusi bird and I sort of expounded that it was the essence of streamlining in flight. I realized, I'm good at this.

I was also interested in historic costume and originally thought I was going to be a costume curator. While I was in high school, I went to talk to someone on staff at the museum and they explained that you didn't start with a specialty like that. You majored in art history and then you specialized.

So I had already gotten some advice. I applied to Penn State because my parents didn't have a lot of money. So I was going to be going to either Penn State, or Temple [University], or the University of Pittsburgh. Those were the three places I applied as an undergraduate. Then as I started taking courses, my interests changed over the years.

Q: Can you talk in a little more detail about what you did on the SoHo project?

Harris: Well, the first thing that we did was go to the Buildings Department [New York City Department of Buildings] and we started reading the block and lot folders for the buildings. So Gina told us, "Go through the block and lot folders, read the permits, transcribe the information." For the project, they were pulling the drawings—in some cases, they had to humidify the drawings or the permits because the paper was so brittle. So we created this humidification chamber. It was a metal locker where they plugged up all the holes and put a bucket of water in there. You left the plans for a day or two in this thing. Then they were pliant enough that you

could open them up.

So we had this little room that we'd sit in. We'd be going through the drawings. We had the interesting discovery that several of the streets in SoHo had been renumbered, which we didn't discover until several weeks into the project. That meant that the information that we had taken down had to be readjusted because it was for the wrong building.

Then when we were going through the block and lot folders, there were a series of buildings for which we hadn't found any information in terms of new building information. So Gina taught some of us how to do tax record research so that you might be able to come up with an estimate on the dates.

Gina had already been the director of research at Landmarks and was concerned that the Commission was just looking at doing only two streets, doing Broome Street and Broadway, and not the entirety of SoHo. She was very anxious that all of SoHo or as much as possible be designated. I guess Dr. Weisman may have figured out that they could apply—there was no such thing as the National Endowment for the Arts or the National Endowment for the Humanities—they applied for a grant from the National Endowment for the Sciences. They incorporated sociologists. So we were supposedly studying art history and sociology and several other things, so we could get the grant from the National Science Foundation. Of course, the idea behind it all was to have all this documentation to present to the Landmarks Commission, so they would have no choice but to designate a bigger area. And it worked.

Q: I guess I'd like to ask you now to start talking about your time at LPC, and I want to know also about your involvement with the union [Civil Service Technical Guild – Local 375]. So however it makes sense for you to kind of get into this topic, please do.

Harris: So I started working for Landmarks in December of 1984. My first project was a cast-iron fronted building on Canal Street. So it was drawing on my background in working on cast-iron buildings in SoHo. Soon after I did that, there were a couple things I worked on that didn't go anywhere. I got pulled into working on the Broadway theaters and I worked on theater histories for a year or so. They did decide to do the Century Building and I got to write that designation report, but I was mostly working on Broadway theaters for the first part of my career. That was interesting and it drew on all the wasted time watching old movies instead of studying for my courses when I was in college.

Q; I like when those things overlap.

Harris: So anyhow, [R.] Jay Shockley had been involved with the union. I guess there are two things. I went to my first union meeting or two. At one of them, people were complaining about the lack of equipment, and that they had asked for new cameras and additional typewriters. This was 1985.

Janet O'Hare, who was then the chapter president, saw a sucker in me and said, "Gale, why don't you go ask the executive director where we stand on this?" I don't know why I agreed to do this, but I did. So I sort of wrote a little note and said, "I've been asked to talk to you about this. Can I

come up and see you?” So I went to see Lenore Norman, the executive director, and I started to ask about this, getting the equipment. And Lenore said, “Gale, you’re a good girl. I know there are just a few troublemakers here. Who are they?” I answered, “Well, it was the consensus of the group that we needed this equipment. So where do we stand on getting the equipment?”

Q: And that’s when you knew that you were going to be good at this—

Harris: This made me realize that they did need a union.

Q: Yes. Wow.

Harris: Then I guess Jay was already sort of involved in the union and he got me to go to the first delegates meeting with him. So I used to participate a little bit. Then Jay followed Janet O’Hare as the chapter president. They were looking for somebody and I thought I might be interested in doing it. And then I was the chapter president. Well, I’m still the chapter president, but I get to give it up in two weeks. [Laughs]

Q: When did you become the chapter president?

Harris: In the late 1980s. So I’ve been chapter president for over thirty years. It was hard to find a successor. It was hard for me to give it up and it was hard to find anybody that would take it on. But it looks like I have some people now, which is a good thing because I’m retired and I cannot continue.

Q: What sort of things did you do as the chapter president? What is that role like for LPC?

Harris: It's a sort of constant asking for stuff, for more money. They constantly understaff the preservation department. The city does not take care of its buildings very well. People work in conditions that are grubby. So we constantly have health and safety stuff. In some cases, I've succeeded in interceding for people in terms of their [LPC administration] getting the rules wrong on how much time you get for leaves. They'd try to fire people without going through the grievance process, et cetera. It's frustrating because you never achieve what you'd like to achieve. But if you didn't do it, things would be worse. So I've hung in there over the years and tried to do what I could. I've been involved in the politics of the union. It was the camaraderie of that and the great struggles of that, et cetera.

Q: Having been the chapter president for so long, can you speak to any changes that you've seen, either among the staff or the function of the union?

Harris: I think that perhaps when they first got the union—the union had already been established from some years when I started. When they first organized, it was to get benefits because the salaries had been incredibly low. The first people, especially in the research department, were supposed to be the wives of successful businessmen. They used to share phones. So people always got colds. There wasn't really enough room. People often worked at home because people shared desks. It wasn't particularly professional and it wasn't looked on as a profession. So the first thing that they organized for was more pay and to have the benefits, in

terms of sick leave and a prescription plan, that the unionized workers had. There were certain things that you got as a city worker, but you got more if you were in the union.

So over the years, preservation has become an actual profession. There are schools where you can study preservation. There are still more women than men, but there are more men, and there are more straight men. So there's more demand for better salaries, which the Commission still doesn't meet as well as it should. The people that run the Commission still think of themselves as being sort of fluff, and vulnerable, so they're not as willing to fight for money.

Sometimes I think managerial salaries have gone up a lot, but staff salaries are not commensurate with what the people that work for the Buildings Department make. The work is in some ways more specialized in preservation. That's still an outstanding problem. I've tried to bring it up, but I don't think it's been addressed as well as I'd like to see it. There's still not enough of a career path because the Commission's still pretty small. There's not enough of a place for all the people to stay there, build up their expertise and be able to stay.

Q: That makes sense.

Harris: That's a problem that people from other agencies don't have. It's been one of the big frustrations in trying to do this.

Q: I want to ask about when you first moved to the city, where were you living?

Harris: The first place I lived was a share at Riverside Drive and Tiemann Place, up by Columbia. I liked living in that neighborhood and it was certainly convenient for getting to work. The building had been rent-controlled. The owner was trying to convert it to a co-op. My roommate and I were subletting from the woman who had been my roommate's friend. My roommate was a sculptor and she was subletting from a woman ceramicist. Margie and her husband wanted to buy a place Upstate. So they had moved out of the apartment and were living Upstate. Eventually, they decided that they would take money from the landlord not to renew the lease. I wanted my own apartment and I ended up moving to the apartment I'm still living in, in Bay Ridge. So I've only lived two places in New York. [Laughs]

Q: Wow, that's rare. Why Bay Ridge?

Harris: Well, I wanted to live in Park Slope, and I looked in Park Slope—this is 1986 that I'm looking for an apartment—I was already sort of priced out of Park Slope. Everything I looked at was weird in some way, or I couldn't afford it. There was one woman [Luella Adams, who worked in the Survey Department at LPC] that was living in Sunset Park. I had looked at an apartment in Park Slope and I figured, I'll get on the Fifth Avenue bus and I'll take the bus to Sunset Park and I'll see where it looks safe and like I might want to live there. And I'll get out of the bus. I rode all the way through Sunset Park. I didn't realize you really needed to be over at Eighth Avenue. And I ended up in Bay Ridge and it looked really nice. I started going to real estate places and I could afford the apartments in Bay Ridge, as long as I didn't want to live on Shore Road. It just was a lot more affordable, and that's why I ended up there. It was relatively close to Lower Manhattan. Of course then they started working on the Manhattan Bridge and the

subway stopped going there express—

Q: You had said before when you were working on the SoHo project, how you realized how much you loved working on this stuff in New York. So what was it about New York City architecture history and city history that you loved so much?

Harris: Well, I like cities. I don't drive. So that was natural. SoHo just has all these wonderful, beautiful buildings. There's just amazing architecture and details all over the city. We're talking about the '70s and the '80s. There was this collective falling in love with this city, even at a time when the city's financial state wasn't so great. But when you think about those Woody Allen movies, like *Manhattan* (1979), when Woody Allen takes you on this tour of all these interesting architectural bits, and he's showing these to Diane Keaton, then it really turns out that she's the one that's interested. She's the one that's [laughing] on the board of the National [Trust]—it's just interesting. Also when I was working on my thesis, I used to sort of sit and read the architectural records, the AABN [*Architecture and Building News*] and the *Real Estate Record* [*and Builders' Guide*]. I just liked doing the research. I just like doing research a lot. I like libraries. It's natural for me.

Q: And I wanted to ask about, I guess, when did you start to realize that gay and lesbian history was not part of what you were doing at the Landmarks Commission? Or that it wasn't being presented the same way as other kinds of cultural history?

Harris: It wasn't so much thinking about whether you'd include—the first thing that happened

was I was working on the Lundy's [Restaurant] designation report and I found this article about [Frederick William Irving] Lundy having been bilked out of all this money because his boyfriend was in this conspiracy with other people. And one of them had dressed up as Lundy and they had gone to the bank and taken stuff out of the safe deposit box. The thing was, it was the largest instance of personal fraud—or whatever it was, larceny—in New York State up until that point. So I put that into the body of the designation report in the section that was Later History.

Dorothy Miner thought it might upset Lundy's family, who still owned the building. So it had to go into a footnote because she didn't want it as something that would create a conflict. Then of course, the family came in for a meeting with Lundy's lawyer, who is the one that talked about the chauffeur having—had actually said in an interview with probably *Newsday* that the guy had been Lundy's lover. And they came in for this meeting and guess who had just gotten out of jail? The lover. [Laughs] But by this time, the report was all pretty much final.

Q: As a researcher, how do you go about making decisions about what might upset someone versus what is the history?

Harris: I didn't think about it as something that would potentially upset—at the Commission, one, you're trying to be celebratory as much as possible while still being true to history. I sometimes wouldn't have things be confrontational. But you still want to do justice to history. All of these things are difficult things to achieve. Certainly, I think over the years, the trend has been to try to be more inclusive of more groups. Still, there are groups in New York City that aren't really represented in terms of what the Commission does. There's been a push for African-

American history for quite a while now. We've sort of pushed for gay and lesbian history. The Commission sort of tried to address Latino history—I guess it's Latinx now—but it certainly hasn't gone very much in depth. We really haven't done anything about Asians. We have one thing for Arabs and it's a Christian church. [Laughs]

Q: So it's a bigger issue than just gay and lesbian history.

Harris: But Jay Shockley, especially, tried. I guess when we got involved with OLGAD [Organization of Lesbian and Gay Architects + Designers], the members of OLGAD felt like we wanted to see LGBT history recognized and documented.

Q: That's where this idea started to coalesce?

Harris: Yes, I think. Both Jay and I had been involved with forming a gay and lesbian group in our union in DC [District Council] 37 and that had gotten off the ground. We had done our bit and other people had taken over. We needed something to do, and OLGAD then had formed. And within OLGAD, there were a whole bunch of people that were in preservation. So we started meeting in people's apartments separately.

Q: Were you part of forming OLGAD?

Harris: I wasn't part of forming OLGAD. I got involved early on, when they were having—but it was already formed and they were having meetings in The [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual &

Transgender Community] Center. I guess some people decided that there would be a preservation group. As I said, there were meetings at Bill Ayres' apartment and some other people's apartments and we started talking about what buildings were most significant, what were the most significant ones that should be recognized. Of course, the Stonewall [Inn] seemed to be the most obvious thing. There were a bunch of people in that group that worked for the [National] Park Service. They couldn't really ask for a National Register [of Historic Places] recognition if they were Park Service employees. I had just worked on the African Burial Ground [National Monument], so I had experience working on a National Historic Landmarks nomination.

Q: About how big was OLGAD as a whole and then the preservation group? How many people are we talking about?

Harris: OLGAD was attracting over one hundred people to its meetings. I didn't know if you had—[unfolds map]

Q: I don't. Oh, yes.

Harris: That's the infamous map. I have nicer ones, but I found that laying some place. [Laughs] I just took that. It's the only one I could find. It was actually on the floor.

Q: Truth be told, I haven't seen the original one yet. I've just seen the updated digital version. So I want to ask you to talk further about the National Register nomination, but also, if you could

talk about the sites that were selected for this map. Talk a little bit more about how that came together, how you nominated them within the group and made decisions, and how the work got divided.

Harris: So we formed a committee within the preservationists' committee. We formed a map committee. We formed a committee to nominate the Stonewall for designation. We originally thought we didn't just want to do a map. We wanted to do a guidebook. But reality sets in. There were some people that did lectures and things like that for the big meetings that they would have. So you had two groups on the map committee. There were the designers and the people that were the historians, some of whom worked for the Landmarks Commission.

Here's the list of the people. Okay, so we had people that wrote the history. The money was coming from Ruth Messinger's office. So we were doing Manhattan. The Village [Greenwich Village] was the densest. We wanted to do Harlem so that we'd get some African American sites and important places in Manhattan. We came up with a huge list. I started reading about some stuff. Then we sort of whittled down our list to things that everybody could agree would be interesting. Then it was Joan [C.] Berkowitz and Mary Jablonski who were doing Harlem. They pretty much came up with their sites. They were still working for the Park Service but they were best buddies at that point. They took Harlem. Tom Reynolds was doing musical stuff. I did The [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community] Center and Stonewall because I was writing the Stonewall nomination.

Each of us did our sites. Jay did a theater thing and Andrew [S.] Dolkart offered to be the editor

because he felt there should be one editorial voice that would sort of keep things consistent. So he didn't write entries. He just edited everything. Then there were the fights between the historians—then you had the people that were in charge of doing the design. The design people wanted the text immediately. Then they took forever with the design and then we were really unhappy with the fact that they decided to put the text on top of the maps. There were always all these conflicts.

Q: What were the conversations around—like Daughters of Bilitis [Offices] where that meeting place was, sure, but Carnegie Hall, Apollo Theater, what were the conversations like around those more significant places that have a more well-documented history, and putting them on this map?

Harris: I think it was that we felt that there were lots of gay people associated with—it was claiming our rightful place in the history of music. In some cases, it was that you thought you knew people were gay but then documenting it sometimes was a problem. I know what I started doing is just reading lots of biographies. I don't know what other people were doing. You sort of knew there were some gay associations with the Chelsea Hotel. That was one of my entries and as I started researching it, there was more and more stuff.

Q: It seems like there's a surprisingly good balance between sites that are about lesbian history, representing that history, and then also representing spaces that were more about the gay male community. That struck me as surprising: not overly slanted towards men's history. Can you correct me if I'm wrong? Or tell me about what those discussions were like? How did you strike

that balance?

Harris: Well, we had three women writing entries. That already meant that we would have a certain amount of women's history. It was sort of at a period where Blanche Wiesen Cook was publishing the stuff about Eleanor Roosevelt. So we ended up with a lot of Eleanor Roosevelt associations, more than we might have, just because that was coming out new. Andrew Dolkart has been a friend of George Chauncey's for all these years. So we had access to some of George's research. That informed what we were doing.

Q: His book had come out, I can't remember if it was the late '80s, or if it was right around this time.

Harris: I think there might have been striving to have women's stuff represented, but I don't know if we had to do that much conscious thinking about it, that we were going to do it. I'm the one that came up with the Daughters of Bilitis site. Now I realize that that was sort of a minor site, but I went through the Lesbian Herstory Archives and I found something that had an address. Still, the major problem is finding actual addresses for things.

Q: Can you remember looking at the map for the first time and getting a sense of the place-based history of gay people in New York?

Harris: I don't know quite how to answer that.

Q: Well, let me ask it this way. You can answer it with what feels accurate for you. What was the impact of creating the map?

Harris: A sense of accomplishment. It was great to have. When the map came out, it didn't get the distribution that we had hoped for because it didn't get printed until really late in the game. So it didn't get circulated in the way we wanted to have it. Now I realize it did eventually get out. But still, it was exciting and a feeling of accomplishment to have done that. Then it was something that you could share with people. As the Directors of Research at the Landmarks Commission changed, each one got a copy of the map. So it was something to get people to start thinking about this. We were all really pleased with ourselves, that we had accomplished it. We still feel that way.

Q: Yes, Jay in his interview said, "We literally now say this was the first effort in the entire United States to do an LGBT place-based history project." Do you agree with that? Does that sound accurate?

Harris: He's much more aware of how we fit into the broader context than I am. So if he says so, I believe it. [Laughs]

Q: Okay, great.

Harris: Because we were in the beginning efforts of LGBT history, but I don't know how much had been accomplished at that point.

Q: And you were simultaneously working on the nomination for Stonewall. Can you tell me how that played out?

Harris: Well, it didn't play out. I worked on it with one other person who was working in LPC, somebody else that had been a former staff member. They were then working someplace else. We went to talk to the proprietor of the bar that was there then, who was enthusiastic. It was sort of like, who was the owner of the building? The estate of Manny [E.] Duell. Would they be in favor? It seemed like there was a roadblock there. Then it seemed that the Park Service—I submitted the original nomination to Bill Bolger, who had been the person that had shepherded through the African Burial Ground. He had given me information on other cultural historical sites, had talked with me about sites that were less than fifty years old. He said one of the analogies was the thing with the space program, where you knew by only a few years later what were the significant sites.

So he initially didn't think that the fifty-year thing was going to be that much of a problem. I sent a copy of Martin [Bauml] Duberman's book [*Stonewall*] with the nomination. There was already a body of scholarship that the Park Service could have looked at. Then on the other hand, we sort of knew that this was politically a hot potato. This was the age of [Senator] Jesse [A.] Helms [Jr.] and all that stuff. But I guess maybe I was naïve still. I thought the [President William J.] Clinton administration would take more of a chance on it than they did. But the problems with the estate not welcoming this, I think they just wouldn't meet with us. They did not see any reason why they would want this. The geniuses that decided to incorporate the area around, so as to get over

the problems of owner consent, my hat's off to them.

Q: Well, I'm impressed. Knowing that it was a hot potato, and the estate wasn't interested, and that no site had ever been added to the Register for gay and lesbian history, I'm impressed that you did it anyway. You submitted the nomination.

Harris: At that point, I guess I didn't know it was going to be a no. We started trying to get signatures on a petition. I don't know what happened to all the petitions; they were in James Colgate's closet for many years. [Laughs] I can remember that OLGAD was marching in one of the Gay Pride parades, and Joan Berkowitz going up to RuPaul and saying, "RuPaul, sign this."

Q: You've got to get into that closet. [Laughs] The petition might be an historic document too. Well, to go from there, can you tell me about your impressions of the rejection letter that first round?

Harris: Pretty upset. Flabbergasted that there was no acknowledgment of the importance of Stonewall. I thought I had done a fairly good job of explaining its significance, and there was the Duberman book. This just seemed like an uncontestable fact, that it was recognized as being of overwhelming significance to the gay and lesbian community. But it was just sort of a slap, disappointing.

Q: I think there's some debate among the LGBT Historic Sites crew whether the letter was outwardly homophobic or more of, "What are we going to do about it? We can't do anything,

our hands are tied,” kind of a response. Do you have a position on that?

Harris: At the time, I thought it was homophobic. [Sighs] It’s hard to go back in time through the culture wars. Certainly, I’m now more aware of how really bad they were. When you think of all the “don’t ask, don’t tell” and how the people in the Clinton administration and [Congressman] Barney Frank thought they were doing a step forward, and how bad that was, I think you have to look at it in that context.

Q: It’s easier to see the violence of it with distance than it was to see it at the time?

Harris: It happened. I put it behind me. We went on. There’s been certainly a lot of progress since then.

Q: Yes, absolutely. Now when you nominated Stonewall a second time, can you tell me about that experience?

Harris: Well, I wasn’t so much involved with that. Jay was sort of the one that’s recorded the history of that. The pressure came from on high, down to the state, and the state contacted Andrew Dolkart. I guess Andrew contacted Jay. We all went out to lunch. We may have gone to lunch again, because there was a lunch where Andrew brought David Carter to lunch. They were going to start working on this.

My parents had been divorced. My mother had remarried. Her husband had died. My mother had

had a stroke, and I was in the position that she was in a nursing home. I was going to the nursing home every night. So I wasn't really able to work on the second nomination. My name's on the nomination form, but I didn't really have much to do at all with doing the nomination. I did a little bit of research at the end, but I really didn't work on the second.

Q: Do you think that your nomination in 1994 influenced—

Harris: I didn't even fill out a nomination form. I did a nominating letter. So I hadn't even done a nomination form. Andrew and Jay wrote the nomination. It's their baby.

Q: And do you think that the openness to accepting the site onto the National Register—what had changed in those few years to make a site like Stonewall desirable to the National Park Service, or would make them consider recognizing its history?

Harris: Well, first there was the big political change. The Clinton administration was on its way out. They were doing something at the end that they could do. It was sort of like the liberal forces managed to push through something and they could do it then. They didn't have to run for office a second time. They took advantage of the situation. I think that in the intervening years, there had been a little more acceptance, but it was just the ability to do it. The idea that you would include the streets—and David Carter had done all this research—and that you could incorporate the battle for the streets, made it a much richer story in a way.

Q: And my understanding is that was borrowed from the policy used for Civil War battlefields, is

that right?

Harris: [nods]

Q: Do you think it was a similar situation with Stonewall being named a National Monument in 2016? [President Barack H.] Obama's on his way out, can push it through? Or do you think there were other forces, I guess, that made its acceptance as a National Monument inevitable or acceptable?

Harris: Well, I think Obama was on his way out, but I think there had been all these moves up to that. Thank you, [Vice President Joseph] Joe Biden. Thank you, [United States] Supreme Court. Thank you, *Modern Family* and all the things that happened in those twenty-five years that were positive. And then it also made a difference that the building was already individually designated, because then the owners of the building didn't have anything to lose and didn't have something to gain by it being a National Monument and all that. They had already lost their ability to change the appearance of the building.

A year after it was designated, they started doing all this work on it. Are you aware how they started doing all these bad alterations, where they were chipping off bricks and stuff like that, not matching the brick color? So they had to be stopped. It was perhaps unfortunate that the commissioners had talked so much about significant historical and cultural significance in this pretty building. The owners probably thought they had carte blanche to change the façade. But you don't really want to change the façade. You want it to look the way it did at the time of the

historic event—don't take down the parapet.

Q: How did Stonewall getting added to the National Register, and that history gaining recognition, how did that change your work at the Commission? Thinking of the Lundy brothers' footnote, did you find that things had changed?

Harris: Well, they changed gradually over the years, because I got to sort of incorporate gay and lesbian history more openly as our designations went along. One of the ones that I did was a house in Staten Island where the second owner was an opera singer who was gay. I got to pretty much openly say in the body of the text that he left the house to his partner of a number of years. Then there was another house in Staten Island where the two men that owned it together are lovers. Both Episcopalian priests. I got to openly write about their relationship. Jay got to write about gay and lesbian history in the South Village for the South Village Historic District report. Towards the end, we actually had this subcommittee on gay and lesbian sites and we did PowerPoint shows that were precursors to the website.

Q: Yes, I'm interested in hearing more about the LGBT Historic Sites Project.

Harris: Well, periodically, the Commission talks about doing historical cultural designations. There would be the "we don't know how to regulate them" fight. But in that particular moment, they thought they'd create some subcommittees and look at areas that had not been addressed. Then they set up a couple of subcommittees. There was Black history and there was LGBT and there was women's history. Those were sort of the main ones. So these various groups then were

tasked with coming up with potential sites. So we started creating lists of potential landmarks based on having done this history.

Each time you get a new commissioner, they'll say, "We don't know how to regulate these things." Then the staff will say, "You can use the Secretary of the Interior's Standards criteria." You're not inventing something new. [Laughs] People had thought about how to deal with these for fifty years. "Oh, we don't know how to do this."

Q: Good news.

Harris: I think I wandered off. What was your question?

Q: Well, I was asking about the origins of the LGBT Historic Sites Project. It sounds like its origins were in the Commission, actually, as a committee.

Harris: Yes.

Q: And then how did it branch off to become its own project?

Harris: Well, what was within the Commission stayed within the Commission. But as people have left, they haven't really reactivated the committees. The people that are still there that were involved with these things have done some stuff in terms of trying to address certain things. Like women's history—for women's suffrage, they did some stuff. They've put up some website

things.

In the meantime, with the LGBT website, I think it was mostly Ken Lustbader and Jay who got interested in pushing the historic preservation community into doing more about LGBT history. I guess we who had been involved with the map had always felt like maybe we wanted to do more. So Ken sort of got us together to talk about doing more at a certain point. Then he and Jay and Andrew decided that they wanted to create a website. Jay was going to leave the Commission.

I was there. I was working on Stonewall for the designation report when they formally were creating the [LGBT] Historic Sites Project. I had a discussion with Mark Silverman about participating in the project. He's the agency counsel. It was sort of like, I had to decide whether I would do that, or I would continue to push for things within the Commission for LGBT designations. I sort of said, "Well, while I'm here, let me be the voice." But then of course, they stopped doing that.

I completed the last PowerPoint for Gay Pride Month and the last presentation for LGBT sub-committee, and we made recommendations. But Meenakshi Srinivasan, who was the commissioner, the chair of the Commission, did not go forward with any of those things. I ended up, for the last year I was there, mostly working on backlog items. It didn't matter. I could have been involved from the beginning.

Q: So now that all of you who are involved in the LGBT Sites Project, the website, are separate

from the Commission, how do you think that the work of the website influences the ability of these sites to actually get landmark status?

Harris: The Commission certainly looks at the website and the research they're doing as they're looking for potential sites. I think the project has a voice but that the Commission still has both difficulty dealing with buildings that are not pretty buildings, and doing history. From their calculation, politics still rule. It's just to me incredibly frustrating that they have not seemed to budge about the Whitman House [Walt Whitman Residence, 99 Ryerson Street, Brooklyn]. As I'm doing stuff in the outer boroughs, I'm finding stuff in Staten Island, but whether we'll ever get the Staten Island councilperson to agree with the designation status—

Q: Yes, leave it at Alice Austen, I guess, maybe once and done.

Harris: It's interesting, since I've been researching Staten Island stuff, that Alice Austen was a lesbian was certainly not something that gained easy recognition on Staten Island. It was quite controversial in those days. There was an [*Staten Island*] *Advance* article that said it was not really news.

Q: Now it's in writing at the house. Well, I guess as we are kind of wrapping up here. I wanted to ask you to reflect a little on the progress that you've made, in particular since the map, but even before that.

Harris: Well, it's been fascinating and fun. It's certainly gratifying that there's this interest and

that there's this acceptance of this kind of history, which there wasn't when we were starting out certainly. It's been exciting and interesting.

Q: By doing all this research, you've really added to a broader understanding, particularly of the places where this community is able to grow and connect. Is there anything about the research that you've done for the LGBT Sites Project from the outer boroughs that you want to add here? Anything particularly exciting that you've uncovered? I read through the reports that you'd written on the site where your name was attached to them, and I think every single one of them almost was new to me—new information, sites, and people that I hadn't heard of before. I learned a significant amount from the research that you've done—I'll put it that way—and I think it's not just me, who already knows quite a bit about this history.

Harris: Well, I'm still learning this stuff. One of the people I'm researching now is Michelle Cliff. Have you ever heard of her? She was born in Jamaica of mixed race and then grew up for some years on Staten Island where her parents sort of moved and passed [racially]. Then they went back to Jamaica and then returned to Staten Island when she was a teenager. Then she graduated from Curtis High School and went to Wagner [College]. Got a PhD in art history at the Warburg [Institute] in London. Then she was working as an editor in New York for a while and met Adrienne Rich. They then sort of went off together. She became a writer and editor, a college professor, and wrote novels based on her childhood in Jamaica at first, and then short stories that are grounded in her youth on Staten Island. A wonderful writer that I had never, ever heard of, and a fascinating history. So yes, it's an exciting discovery. So I find this a wonderful retirement.

Q: You certainly earned a PhD after all these years of original research, I think. Is there anything else that you'd like to add that we didn't get to talk about?

Harris: I think that's it.

Q: Okay. Thank you, Gale.

[END OF SESSION]