UNCOVERING THE ROOTS OF LGBT PRESERVATION

The Reminiscences of

John Reddick

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with John Reddick conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on December 20, 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: John Reddick | Location: J.M. Kaplan Fund, New York, NY

Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic | Date: December 20, 2019

Q: Today is December 20, 2019 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing John Reddick for the New York Preservation Archive Project. Can you start by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Reddick: My name is John Reddick. I've lived in New York City since 1980. I grew up in Philadelphia, a very diverse and interesting neighborhood. It had a lot of historic fabric that dates back to the Colonial era. So I've always had an interest in architecture and the physical environment.

Q: Can you tell me more about the place where you grew up and the people you grew up with?

Reddick: Well, it was a very integrated neighborhood, and so I grew up with no consciousness of economics and intelligence being associated with race. I went to all different types of schools growing up, in different environments. It felt like I could come and go. Because of that, I always followed my interests. So I went to a vocational high school but realized I was interested in architecture. I had to take some other courses to supplement that. I went on interviews to be like an office boy and I never thought that, as a Black kid, I'm not going to get this, even though I go into an office that was all-white at the time. I always felt I was rewarded by following my interests. So I did.

Q: Can you go into a little more detail about—like you said, the area that you grew up in was integrated. Just give me some specifics about what that was like, the other people that you went to school with.

Reddick: It was called Mount Airy. My parents just by happenstance moved into that neighborhood. My mother grew up in a suburban town [North Wales] outside of Philadelphia where she and her sister were the only Blacks in their class in the 1940s. For some reason, she moved into the city [while] most of her cousins stayed up in that neighborhood [which] got developed in the post-war era to the more suburban life. We were in semi-detached houses in Philadelphia. There's almost a house built for every income level. But our neighborhood that we were in, it's sort of situated from modest row houses to semi-detached houses to mansion houses.

We had a very engaged principal in our public school, [Beatrice Chernock] who went on to be an elected official. I had Ed Bradley, who was a *60 Minutes* correspondent—he had gone to Cheyney [University of Pennsylvania], a Black teachers' college, had been an intern teacher there and went on to come back to be a teacher. I met him again in New York and he talked about how the principal recruited him. She wanted a Black male presence in the school. So there was always a kind of consciousness, a balance. It's a large, I would say, sort of WASPy, Jewish combination in that school. But I went to a very ethnic vocational school, a real cross section. I found out that whites didn't like whites, Poles and Italians, and this and that; it was something I never knew growing up. Going to a more ethnic school, you start to realize that.

The gentleman [Thomas Hruslinski] who taught the architectural graphics course had gone to the University of Pennsylvania, had been an Olympic soccer player. He was very much known in the profession throughout Philadelphia. He had real connections to a lot of the offices. Going to the office, by eleventh grade or so, you went to school half the day and worked in an office the other half day. I remember meeting [Louis] Lou Kahn in an auction house looking at books and him chatting with me about what I was looking at. It just felt really ideal. The University of Pennsylvania, we had a lot of professors at U of P. I remember going there, doing stuff for the office.

It was Francis, Cauffman, Wilkinson & Pepper, and each partner had a real distinctive aspect in the office. Mr. Pepper had been the grandson of the senator from Pennsylvania and the founder of the public library. Another one was more the business side and Pepper was more the social connection side. Maybe only two of the parties really were at the drawing board, overseeing any real drawing work. But they were really wonderful to work for. I realized, all the young people I have ever met since, I always tell them to send out a bunch of resumes, it's about enthusiasm. In other words, out of high school, you're all really equal. You don't think that then, but it's being eager and enthusiastic that really makes the difference.

Q: So where did you go from there?

Reddick: I went to Ohio State [University] as an undergraduate. In fact when I applied, Ohio State didn't take the SATs—it was something else. So I said Howard University, some other schools in Ohio. To this day, I don't even know why I had Ohio State on my list. But my

counselor said, "Oh, you'll never get into Ohio State. It's a Big Ten school." I didn't even know what Big Ten meant, but because he said that, that became the focus of why I was going to go. He wasn't going to tell me where I couldn't go. I had to take a different test, start doing some legwork myself. Neither one of my parents had gone to college. So they were always extremely supportive but all these things we were asking and talking about were beyond what their experience had been. They had always been very nurturing and encouraging.

I applied and I got in. I went to Ohio State. I had a suite of roommates, four to a suite. I was the only Black person. I had anticipated that I would be the only Black roommate—but they didn't—it was the other way around. It all worked out fine but some of the parents; I can remember sort of fishy greetings and stuff like that. But it was fine. Overall, it was a really fun experience.

Then I was there for four years. I worked a little bit, after I graduated for a short period, with their public school system, in the architectural office of the public schools in Columbus, Ohio. Then applied to Yale [University]. I didn't think I was going to get in the first round so I sent my portfolio and asked them to forward it to Penn [University of Pennsylvania]. That was the other place I applied. But in the back, I left a section for comments. I think it impressed them that I left a section [laughs], that I was open to their opinions. When I got to Yale, I saw all the portfolios in the registrar's office. When people apply, the whole room is nothing but shelves of all the applicants. You just wonder how they could ever possibly make a decision.

Q: And what led you to study architecture? What was studying architecture like at Ohio State?

Reddick: Well, my mom was always very artistic and creative. It was part of her volunteer engagement. She was a housewife for the early part of our education. So she volunteered for a lot of school activities. That was always one of her interests. She was always demonstrating that, doing sets for school plays, just sort of engaged. Out of that public school involvement, she got a job working for a bank when they were trying to recruit African Americans. That wasn't her background. It really changed her look at economics and savings. We were coming of age into the late '60s, '70s, that was extra money in the household. Back when they were buying a house, it was my father's income; there weren't two incomes. So it really helped facilitate paying for our college expenses and things like that. Where were we?

Q: What was it like to study architecture at Ohio State?

Reddick: So for a state [Ohio] that I expected it to have a lot of African Americans, I mean literally, I'd walk across the campus and not see another African American on campus. Really not until around the time when I was graduating, you saw a greater presence. I was there during the Kent State [University shooting of unarmed students by the Ohio National Guard on May 4, 1970], those anti-war efforts. I remember the architecture school was in the row of buildings just beyond the oval where they had all the demonstrations. So I knew I didn't want to fail all my classes but I wanted to be in the spirit of the protests, so we'd go in the back way and submit our projects [laughs] for school, then demonstrate in the front part. But we still made sure we went to our classes. It was a sacrifice for my parents. I couldn't think about just not fulfilling that obligation even if I felt another way.

There, the classes—I don't know if it was one hundred students—but you did your [illustrated project] board, and they had certain regulations on how you would make your presentations. You would just put your work up and you saw it move around. You didn't talk about it. You didn't say a thing about it, which was very different from the Yale experience.

Q: And who did you study with at Ohio State?

Reddick: At Ohio State, there was nobody really famous except I do remember there was [a school connection with] the Historic American Buildings Survey [HABS], which is an engineering survey and a building survey that's a federal project. Communities apply, they get the survey to come, and they do measured drawings of historic structures. And Ohio State actually had the photographer for this group. They had this special kind of camera that could photograph buildings and diminish the perspectives. So you could do measured drawings almost off of the photographs. Mr. [Perry E.] Borchers, I think his connection gave the school an inroads to be able to get applicants in the program.

So one summer, I went to Indiana, another summer, San Diego, and the third one, Wyoming. The towns would have laid out what they wanted you to measure. So I remember in Indiana, they had a Victorian house, and there was another house that had been shipped in pieces and was assembled on site. It had been made elsewhere. Indiana had an automobile industry and they wanted the factory buildings to be measured.

There was a range of things, almost predetermined by the local community. There'd be five

students, one would be a historian and then a historian on the team that was an adult, a professor type, an architect type. So they would supervise us and we would measure all these buildings, and do the drawings. Every so often, I'll see something promoted and I'll see the drawings from HABS or HAER [Historical American Engineering Record], used as document drawings. And they still do it. The program is still done. I'm friends still with some of the people that I did that with.

I took the train across the country when I did it, in San Diego. It was just amazing. That's another thing, I hadn't been to Chicago—I had a little layover and I could see all these great buildings that were built in Chicago, of that early period I remember talking about in school. You could see how the country grew. I mean literally, up to Chicago, you're just seeing the backsides of cities. But from Chicago on, you saw all that corn and wheat and you realize why it was the broker city, the New York of that part of the country. Maybe the train station is on one corner and five blocks away is the state capitol or the city hall. It just deposited you in the centers of all the cities.

Then I had gotten at Goodwill Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and he talks about these areas that I was going through. He was so right on in his descriptions. Literally, I was reading the book at the same time I was making the travels. He so nailed the character of the plains, how far you could see, and how you could see storms approaching for miles and all of that. That was kind of neat. I enjoyed that.

Q: I've taken that train too. It's amazing.

Reddick: It's pretty neat. At night, we were in the viewing car and it was like being on the moon. You can see the shadow of the train going across the landscape and everything. It was really neat.

Q: Tell me about finding out that you were going to go to Yale and what that transition was like.

Reddick: It was great. A friend of my mother's though, my mother said, "Oh, my son's going to Yale," and he thought I was studying to be a locksmith. He always thought Yale was a lock company. [Laughter] I had never been to New Haven. I had applied and I had never seen it. In the summer, I remember going and getting an apartment. I was like, oh my God, New England looks like New England. I get off the train and I walk to campus. There's three churches on the green in New Haven. It looks like an ad for Peyton Place, just something unusual. I got advanced standing. It's a three-year program—because I had an undergraduate degree, I had a lot of the skill sets, and I didn't have to take the first year.

I remember they had this teacher named [Charles Willard] Charlie Moore. He was a really big deal. I had to go look him up in the library; I didn't know who he even was. But I TA'ed [teaching assistant] for Vincent Scully. That was one of the two professors there that I thought were really significant. For Vincent Scully, one of the kids in my class was saying he was going to do this teaching position. And I thought—I don't want to say he didn't seem smart, but he didn't seem any smarter than me. I thought I could use the extra money. If he was going to apply, I would go apply. So I go and apply and I had this T-shirt that I had bought in one of these thrift

stores out in the Midwest when I was doing the HABS stuff, and I'm wearing this T-shirt, and Scully was just chatting. I didn't have to do a test or anything. So he asked me about Winnetka, all these questions about Winnetka. I said, "I don't know." And he said, "Your T-shirt." My T-shirt had said Winnetka on the back of it. I thought it was an Indian name. Later on, I looked it up and it was some ritzy suburbs or whatever. He was asking me questions as if I was in that group.

He hired me to do that [TA] and I did it three different times for him. I don't think he thought differently than I ever thought but he made keen my vision to look at culture in the physical environment, and all of that. At the same time, I also took a class with [Robert] Farris Thompson, who looked at the African American imprint in art and culture. Both of them are very dynamic speakers; know how to weave a story around architecture and culture. It really has impacted how I look at culture. They never thought it was looking down to make things accessible to people. A lot of times you have a professor trying to explain a mansard roof to someone who doesn't know it, they're almost demeaning them, like they have to go back to Architecture 101. But to me, that's a delight. I feel like it's arming people with the tools to do the battle when I'm not in the room. That's more of a goal for me than whether I'm superior when I'm talking about what they don't understand. I'd rather be connecting.

Scully used to always say—he might talk in German or something but he'd always say, "As you know..." And I realized for the person who has heard it before, it makes them leave him alone. For the person who doesn't know it, it tells them they should pay attention. It's something they should know. So I use that trick periodically. But I do feel it's important to me to connect and

give people a sense of the history and the story, particularly for a place like New York. The history is there, if you really learn to look.

Q: Can you talk now about moving to New York? What drew you to New York?

Reddick: I was in Yale and I got a job working for the Connecticut Historical Commission, which was in Hartford. And I took the train from New Haven up to Hartford for an interview for this job. It was in an historic house in downtown Hartford. This is in the '70s. The cities are pretty deserted. Downtown is just for working, particularly Hartford. They never integrated the surrounding East Hartford. People worked in Hartford, but at night, it was like this mass exodus. There was no movie theater downtown.

Anyway, I take the train from New Haven, I get off. The old G. Fox [& Co.], this great Victorian department store was still there. I think there's what today would be some kind of health food restaurant by the train station. I pass the historic houses. The commission was actually in a historic house. I think, "Oh, this is kind of a nice place to want to live."

I go into the lobby of the historic house and the secretary pool and everything was on the ground floor. The little lobby area and all the offices were upstairs. They had my resume and everything. Literally the gentleman comes downstairs, looks right past me and asks, "Where's the applicant?" because I'm African American. He denied it afterward—they hired me—"Oh John, I didn't do that, I didn't do that." But he did. He didn't say, "Are you Mr. Reddick?" He just asked the women in the office, "Where's Mr. Reddick?"

But they hired me. I was hired to do the historic survey. They had files that were done in the 1930s under the WPA and it was really focused on Colonial period architecture. So they wanted to know if those buildings were still there. Did I see frameworks for potential districts? I did what they call a windshield survey. I'd get the USGS [United States Geological Survey] maps and I'd go out and look at all these towns, what was documented, let them know what was still there or not, take a series of snapshot photographs. And on those maps, give indications of what could be potential district areas.

It was neat. There were these really early factories because of the water power. Then by the Civil War era, if they were doing fabric or guns, for the war, they had this big burst, and they'd build these new buildings. You'd see these stone buildings that came later on. You could see the whole social order of the towns. By the factories were the gridded off [streets], houses for the factory workers. Down wind, or up wind—up the hill would be the managers' houses, the bosses' houses, going up from the factory. After awhile, I could look at the USGS map and not even get to the town; I could pretty much guess what the town layout was going to be. It was pretty amazing. It was during the depressed period of a lot of urban life. A lot of these towns are virtually abandoned and stuff like that. It was really interesting.

Q: Was there a lot that was still similar from the '30s?

Reddick: Yes, every time I see some old friends—I just reunited with some old friends from there—they always say, "What was your favorite town?" I say Willimantic. There's this town

that had all those—you could do a movie around that little town. It had all the fabric, the different aspects of the town were still there. Very picturesque.

Q: And then moving to New York City?

Reddick: Well, I was still working there and I was still doing some—Scully had gone on sabbatical and he came back. So he was oversubscribed. So even though I was not there, I was still going and did another TA round for him, because I was working as a consultant really for the state office. I just started driving down. Ted Kennedy was running for President of the United States, the primary part of that, and I came to New York and volunteered to work in the office. I'd come down and stay a few days and work. I just decided I'm going to bite the bullet. This is like 1979–80. That's what I did.

It was a very depressed time in New York but when I came to volunteer, there was an African American gentleman who was also volunteering and you couldn't tell who was part of the New York campaign and who were part of the Kennedy campaign that was moving from each—there were ongoing campaign workers who were going from one campaign to the next. So this African American guy [Robert LaPrince], he had theater connections—he was with the Shubert Organization—and he brought a lot of his friends to come in and lick stamps and put events together. He couldn't tell if I was part of the ongoing team. So it was this little dance before we got to know each other. But he and another person that we'll probably talk about later, Karen Phillips [founding director, Abyssinian Development Corporation], those two people I cannot imagine my life in New York if I had not met those two people.

He knew so many people, just right off the bat. He was so engaged. Robert [Bob] LaPrince was so engaged with the city. He's passed away. He was one of the victims of the AIDS epidemic. But even now, in certain circles in [NYC] African American culture, you bring up his name, they remember him for events and things that he did. I never had a disconnected minute in New York. Once I moved here, I just felt like I was in the swim of what was going on.

For MAS, the Municipal Arts Society, I would go to things. I can't remember what committees I was on periodically. But I still felt connected in that way. I remember MAS had a ceremony at Mount Morris Park where they honored this group of women who were trying to get their building on the National Register, which it still isn't on. Not the National Register but a [New York City] Landmark. Forty-one Convent Avenue was trying to get landmarked. It was such a struggle. I remember [Jacqueline] Jackie [Kennedy] Onassis coming over and saying, "Well, you know how tough the bureaucracy can be," to them at that ceremony.

Q: Were they trying to landmark it for architectural—

Reddick: It's still there. The tenants, they gained control. It's one of those buildings that fell out of the ownership of the landlord and became a tenant-controlled building. So it's still a rent-stabilized or tenant-managed building. They've got some resources to do things but they never got it landmarked.

Q: I'd like to know specifically where in Harlem did you settle?

Reddick: I had a family friend who lived just off Convent, like 147th and Convent Avenue. So we'd come visit her periodically and she was my age, so being in New York, we would visit. And it was such a nice neighborhood and I was kind of sold. She worked for *The New York Times*. She had a very reasonable rent and a very spacious apartment. So when I started looking, I just started looking around in that area. Back then, realty people would put "Building Management By" and I kept seeing A.J. Clark, who was a realtor's name that kept popping up on a lot of them. But other places too in New York like Gramercy Park, I remember seeing his name.

I went into their office, they had an office on—was it Fifty-Seventh Street? It was either 59th or Fifty-Seventh. Which is the through-street? Fifty-Seventh Street, where the Hard Rock Café ended up being, in that building. The building since has been demolished. But you actually went up and there was Mr. Clark. It was still the family. They were like do what can you pay and all of that. I got a one-bedroom apartment for like $175. It was to the back of the building on the fourth floor. Back then, you had security bars on the windows because people could come up the fire escape—and everybody could look in. So I almost never opened the blinds because you're looking at the back of the building. And I told people, the sun came and hit the refrigerator in my kitchen like four days a year. It was like Stonehenge. [Laughs] I walk into my living room and my refrigerator was aglow in the morning. It was a certain period of the year, like when was the sun was the highest. It was like in the middle of the summer, this glow on my refrigerator.

But anyway, I'm still in that building. I moved and got a bigger apartment. I'm on the top floor,

river view. I'm still in that building for a very modest rent. It's still a rent-stabilized building. I was able to leverage because I was moving out of my apartment and this woman and her mother were moving out of this bigger apartment. I could leverage the landlord giving it to me because now he could raise the rent of two apartments as opposed to the rent of one. And my small apartment ended up being the most expensive apartment in the building because those were the apartments that turned over the most. The bigger ones, nobody moved. So probably even today, those apartments on that line are more expensive than the bigger ones.

Q: Wow, that's wild.

Reddick: The politics of real estate. [Laughs]

Q: Yes. Only in this job is where I hear about people who haven't moved in thirty years.

Reddick: Well, when I moved [there], people said they've lived in an apartment fifteen, twenty years. "Oh, you must be kidding." "I can't imagine." I wish I had bought something. I had the access to knowledge, I should have bought something. But after awhile, I kept saying, "If I couldn't buy an apartment as nice as I have, why would I leave?" Now I'm glad I'm there. It's very accessible. It's an elevator building.

Q: What was your awareness of Harlem before you moved there?

Reddick: We had family—my parents have family friends, Oscar Benbow and his wife, Bertha

Benbow. But the husband and his wife are very good friends of my godmother. We spent our summers in Virginia with my father's first cousin. And she had friends in New York. She had worked in New York and made connections in New York. She would come up and visit this Oscar and Bertha Benbow. They were like the first Blacks to live in their building at 135th and Seventh Avenue, across the street from—you'd look out their window and see Smalls Paradise. The club was there but there was also a small office building that had this club on the ground floor.

Mr. Benbow's mother lived to be one hundred. She was one hundred before the Statue of Liberty was one hundred. I was so shocked when the Statue of Liberty turned one hundred. My god, Mrs. Chestnut was older than that. She can remember the neighborhood being rural and moving there really early on, really early development and stuff. Mr. Benbow was a Garveyite. She had lived in that building forever.

They talked about traditions like—that neighborhood was still largely Jewish when they were moving in. Harlem was the second largest Jewish neighborhood in New York, second only to the Lower East Side. They would say there were certain things that Jews couldn't do, either on the holidays or the Sabbath, and they would go turn the light switch or do whatever it was that they couldn't do. There was a lot of cross-cultural history. I've talked to the older people—even like La Marqueta [East Harlem] everyone always thinks it's Hispanic. Well, it did start serving Hispanic products but there had been Jewish vendors there. When the neighborhood changed, they didn't just leave. They stayed Jewish vendors but they sold plantains instead of bananas or whatever it was. There was still a Jewish presence there.

Q: So you didn't just know the neighborhood, you knew its history dating way back.

Reddick: Well, I felt comfortable there as an African American. It was a nice neighborhood. It didn't bother me living around African Americans. I knew I had a spacious apartment. All of those things were harder to come by and it was a picturesque neighborhood. If color was the only thing keeping people out, that wasn't keeping me out.

Q: And what were some of the places that became important to you in your neighborhood, in Harlem or even throughout the city?

Reddick: I went to a lot of different churches, like Riverside Church. To me, Riverside Church was like going to college. It was still too political. They had Guatemalans in the basement [laughs], whatever persecuted group. It's not that I didn't like it but it wasn't like the church I had known growing up.

In the end, I gravitated toward Abyssinian Baptist Church in central Harlem. I really kind of liked going there. I liked the fact it had a history. It was an institution. Besides just the religious life, it was an institution. In that period, the pastor there wasn't Reverend [Calvin O.] Butts [III]. It would become Reverend Butts. He was the assistant pastor at the time. The first and only job he ever had was with Abyssinian Baptist Church. He graduated from Morehouse College. He was the assistant pastor when I knew him from my friend that I talked to you about from the Kennedy campaign, Bob LaPrince. He had known him from Morehouse College. So even that

was sort of an entrée at a level with the assistant minister that I probably wouldn't have had as just a new parishioner.

Then there was a lot of stuff. Vernon Mason was running for DA [district attorney]. He had just lost very closely against Robert Morganthau. I just felt there was a lot of energy in my contemporaries there. They were starting to set up—my friend Karen Phillips, who I had got to know—the establishment of the Abyssinian Development Corporation, and Kevin McGruder who was with LISC [Local Initiatives Support Corporation] also worked with the Development Corporation.

They all have an interest in history, and that church had a great history. So it just brought me more onboard with preservation issues. It was compatible with the things I was already thinking. And I did work for the Abyssinian Development Corporation. At the time, the gentleman who's now the head of the Ford Foundation, Darren Walker, was working there as an administrative person.

Q: What sort of work did you do there?

Reddick: I was doing some target projects. Karen was trying to do some applications to get federal monies, different monies around preservation, dollars. They started doing a big fundraising event once a year. Darren and I, I remember we were working on outreach to bring people into that. Karen always felt that the reputation of the church—it wasn't her skillset that got her access—it was within the confines of New York and the reputation of that church and its

leadership that helped them develop that Development Corporation.

In fact, it's very interesting. David Dinkins had been the mayor and then [Rudolph] Giuliani ran against David Dinkins. Partly why Giuliani won was because at the time, Staten Island wanted to secede from New York. And even though legally it couldn't happen—a ghost's chance for it to ever happen—Giuliani supported it because he realized that if they turned out for borough pride, they were more likely to turn out and vote for him than they would David Dinkins. And that's what happened. And Giuliani came in. Blacks hadn't supported him, Hispanics hadn't supported him. So his minions just knew that anything Black or Hispanic wasn't a high priority.

And then, at the governor level, it just so happened that one of the members of the Abyssinian Baptist Church was supporting George Pataki who was running for governor, who nobody had ever heard of. George Pataki, at the invite of this person, came to Abyssinian Baptist Church and he wanted to speak. This was right before the election. He came and started to walk up to the altar area where the minister speaks and Reverend Butts directed him to speak down at the parishioner level, at the microphone. So anyone who was a member there, there's all these people who have come to the church—I won't name political people, but they're more than welcome to go right up and speak. So we, the membership, realized it was like a lukewarm endorsement—that's something we have to do. We're doing it.

But there was a saving grace for Abyssinian Development Corporation because now Pataki did get elected. It was one of the few—maybe the only—Black church he had ever gone to and that's the only reason the Development Corporation could move forward because Giuliani was putting

the screws on them left and right. It was <u>state</u> funding that allowed them to move ahead. So even when they did the Pathmark [supermarket] project, Abyssinian came to help an East Harlem organization because they were mired in what it would take to do it. What people don't realize is whenever you fight the city on anything, or a rich landlord, time does not work for you. You don't have the financial resources. These people have lawyers on retainer. It costs them no more to fight you than anybody else. It's already built into their overhead. Little organizations have it really rough and they came to help this group out.

It still took a lot of time. When it got down to the wire, Giuliani had the head of the Development Corporation, Karen Phillips, locked in an office. He said, "You have an hour. I can say the deal fell through or the deal's proceeding, but you have to give up fifty-one percent to an entity yet to be named. You can say it will go to a Hispanic organization." And that's what she had to do. He never named anybody. But the split was going to be designated to another group. And his minions, just like with Donald Trump, once those people verbally speak out against you, their minions know they can never say anything nice about you. So if your application's coming in, if Abyssinian didn't cross a *t* or dot an *i*, it was a reason to turn it back. They know that he doesn't want to go to any ribbon cutting with your name on it and you'll never be at any ribbon cutting where he goes. So they were really saved by that connection with Pataki.

Q: Can you talk about—you mentioned this on the phone a little bit—places where you've had connections that have really enabled you to do the kind of work that you intended to do around memorials?

Reddick: Well, that happened—again, Karen Phillips, because they had this political visibility and there was money coming through ISTEA [Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act], transportation enhancement funds. Towards the end of the [President William J.] Clinton administration, Clinton was in very good with [Charles] Charlie Rangel. There was this money out there. The politicians approached Karen and Abyssinian if they would be interested in applying for the Gateway Project to Harlem. They wanted to do something on 110th Street. She thought it was way beyond what she had capacity to do. But she said, "You know, John, [Elizabeth] Betsy [Barlow] Rogers is planning to leave the Central Park Conservancy and she wants to start this initiative looking at public space enhancement with the tools she learned from Central Park."

So I went down and talked to Betsy Rogers and all this stuff—Karen has this thing, she says, "If you're an African American, [and] you have the USDA meat stamp, you should make sure you let people know you have the USDA meat stamp." So I talked to Betsy Rogers. She thought I spoke well about architecture. I mentioned Vincent Scully. "Oh, you know Vincent Scully?" Oh, no, I went to Yale. I could feel myself clawing my way up the ladder. And she said she was interested in applying for this [Gateway Project] thing with her program. She put me in touch with this woman that worked for her, this community outreach person, Erana [M.] Stennett, who I'm still friendly with who now works for Bloomberg. The two of us, totally on spec—she didn't pay—Erana was already on the payroll. For me, it was no money. Erana and I, we had never met each other before. I didn't even know she was African American. I thought Erana Stennett, Central Park Conservancy; she was going to be white. She wasn't. She was African American. She's very opinionated and very specific about everything.

So after we got to be friends and I got to see her work ethic afterwards, I couldn't believe we never had a cross word or anything the whole two to three weeks we had to crank that out. But she knew the political players and what paperwork we needed to get from them. I was writing the proposal, pulling in documentation, and all of that. We put in for it and we got the money.

Even today, if you walk along the four sides of Central Park, the most enhanced streetscape—not just inside the park but the sidewalk—the improvements, both sides of the street, the residential side as well as the park side. The circle, we got funded through the feds. No other side of the park got any federal money. Why not Central Park West? They don't need money from the feds, Fifth Avenue. They would never get it. We weren't billionaire contributors to Central Park but leveraging the political wherewithal and everything, and Betsy's ability to hang in there, financially. Once we got the grant, the money has to come through an agency [City or State], and once the agency has the money, they didn't want us involved. I mean literally, they tried to shut us out of meetings. They brought in other consultants to diminish our roles.

But I could stay in it because Betsy had the wherewithal to keep me in the game. And I was respected by the people in the bureaucracy. So the [African American] construction guys would call me up, "John, you need to be at that meeting." They realized I was really going to battle for them. That was very rewarding.

Just before that or around the same time—I'm trying to think. I guess just before that or pretty close to the same time, I was a neighbor to the people who lived with Ralph Ellison. Through my

civic work, I had already started being on panels, the New York State Council on the Arts and things like that, for art reviews, the subway enhancement, Percent for Art [Program] panels and all this. So I kind of understood what it would take to do public projects. So when this group of neighbors to Ralph Ellison decided at 150th and Riverside—there's a little traffic island—that they wanted to do a memorial to Ralph Ellison, they asked if I would be on the [Ralph Ellison Memorial] Committee. This woman, Ann Dobson, who lived in the building, who really knew the Ellisons, they brought me on board. It was a committee of about ten of us and she always talked about Shackleton's committee.

In the end, everyone on that committee at some crucial time had some access that made it happen better. One of the artists at the end was Elizabeth Catlett and she was prominent enough that she would be out of the circle—you could send her letters but we weren't hearing back from her. It taught me a lesson that you can stand back as an administrator to public projects if you spend the time to make sure really great people submit in the competition, because excellence really does win. A politician could have his niece that he thinks is a great artist or whatever it is, or something hokey.

So with Mr. Ellison, I spent a lot of time showing the committee what types of things are public art. And Mr. Ellison wasn't Frederick Douglass where he felt he had to see him as a figure. He was intellectual. It could be some graphic sculpture around writing. It could be all these different things. It was great. When we had people show—the finalists [an artist]—one person said, "Oh, we're going to have Mr. Ellison sitting on a bench holding *The Invisible Man* and kids can climb up in his lap." We said thank you. When he left, people who really knew Mr. Ellison on the

committee, his neighbors, were like, “He’d never have kids climbing up in his lap.” [laughs] So maybe one hundred years from now, it would be some romanticized version of who he was. [These people really knew him.]

And we asked that they separate that project from another adjoining Riverside project. The Parks Commissioner was willing to do it. Stanley [E.] Michels was a councilmember at the time, very much a park activist. He was a reader and lover of jazz. Any time we needed any extra money or anything, he was willing to help do it. Ken Smith, a landscape architect, at very limited cost, helped do the landscape development stuff before it all got folded into the [NYC Department of] Parks [and Recreation] project. For me, that was the dearest of all the public projects I ever did because all the planets aligned. You would think it would be much easier than it ever was after that. It was really, really special.

Q: Let me ask about landmarking efforts that you’ve been a part of.

Reddick: Well, I would say, in my career, it’s been very frustrating because for example, Abyssinian controlled the Renaissance Ballroom [& Casino] property and because I worked with the Development Corporation, I know how hard they tried. The catering company that took over all these banks around New York to turn them into catering facilities, they talked to them. Cipriani came up and looked but the market wasn’t ripe maybe to make it into a catering facility. A lot of proposals came and went. Nothing was happening. The water was coming in.

Finally, after Karen left, the new director [Sheena Wright] had a deal that they were looking at

going forward where they were going to try to keep part of the façade and do this residential tower. I actually agreed—because they were calendared [for a public hearing with the Landmarks Preservation Commission] but they had never been moved forward on the calendar. There was always that backlog. People had been on the calendar for twenty years and never advanced. And I went down and spoke on behalf of letting them come out from under that to do this financial benefit tower, keep this façade and all of that. And then that deal collapsed; it was around the time that the economy took the downturn. The deal proposed to keep the façade didn't happen, but now they were out from under the rigor of that, and it got demolished. The facility got demolished.

So I always feel bad. I felt empathy for the struggle and all of that. But then the economy did come around, and maybe we would have been able to have done better to save it. But also, I turn the block, and there's a whole block of all this abandonment across the street. There's all these tenement buildings that they will probably never Landmark, but they all got rehabilitated as affordable housing under that. I remember going to [William James] Count Basie's funeral, whatever year that was [1984], and all these news media people were there covering it and I was embarrassed to come out of the church, look across the street, and see the condition of all the abandoned buildings.

In some ways, it's a mixed bag. I wish I worked harder to align around it at the time. That was one that I cared about. They had the other project where they did build the school over the building, the Smalls Paradise building. The building that that was part of is still there and you can see the architecture to that building, even though there's a larger building over top of it. You

can’t comprehend that space.

I always feel like Harlem’s still lacking a broader plan. If you’re talking about the history of the African American experience, it’s the flagship neighborhood for that experience in America. The avenue that the soldiers came back after the First World War, the regiment military band, those soldiers realized their neighborhood looked like Paris after being to Paris, all those things. When I turn up 110th Street and come up that avenue [Fifth Avenue], I still feel the impact of what that was because of my Scullyisms and my sense of architecture and all of that. When they did the protest march against lynching and all the churches marched down the avenues, turned down Fifth Avenue, and went down Fifth Avenue to the headquarters of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], it might mean nothing to all the other paraders, but imagine what it meant to people in Mississippi. If you ever look at those lynching photographs, you realize kids, women, everybody is there, and no one is hiding their faces. Those cameras weren’t like our cameras; you saw the flash go off, you knew the camera was there. But you knew you were never going to be called to testify or anything.

So pictures of Black people marching down Fifth Avenue, the most famous American street, and be able to come back to their church and still have their jobs, still living, their neighborhood wasn’t burned to the ground and all that—what that liberty meant about Harlem to them. Looking out your window of the tenement, it’s the 2000 block of Fifth Avenue and Madison. But it’s not to your cousin in Mississippi, its still “Madison and Fifth Avenue.” You’re seeing the Empire State Building, which is like a Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire movie view. You’re seeing from your roof or your tenement apartment. I realize how empowering all of that must

have been for my ancestors, to try to keep some aspect of that together.

That still has not happened in Harlem. To live under the current Trump administration, where if it's not visible, it doesn't exist, how it can be so easily dismissed. African Americans never had a lot of wealth. So what might seem like minor buildings and architecture to the writers of landmarking is not insignificant to my community.

I was in South Carolina and we went to a plantation house, Drayton Hall. It's a beautiful plantation house and they talk about it. But as we were leaving, they said, "We're going to do a little presentation if you and your friend want to come." So we went over to the presentation and one of the first slides she showed was an ad for a slave sale from an old newspaper. It says, "West African rice knowledge." That was the first time in my life I realized the cultivation of rice, the cash crop of the Carolinas did not exist. The Blacks from West Africa realized it was ripe for that cultivation. Partly why there's the Gullah culture of people speaking the same language is because after that, they only wanted people from West Africa. In other plantation cultures, Blacks couldn't even speak to each other, Africans couldn't even speak to each other. Here there was this homogeneity because they needed it to [cultivate rice]. So the lazy guy sucking the mint julep on the porch had nothing to do with his wealth-building, not in the work, not in the intellectual knowledge, or anything.

When you leave that plantation house, nothing's preserved that gives me any inclination that there were one thousand slaves that had to live there. There had to be a community of housing and everything for those people. I've yet to be anywhere that gives you any mapping, any

indication of the proportion of the workforce it took to make that possible, the acknowledgment of that. So to me, you can't tell that story without being able to physically make it visible to people.

Q: Yes. This is kind of sticking with that idea: what is the importance of making historical narratives visible, especially for people who have been marginalized?

Reddick: Not just marginalized, the humanity of the experience! Like when I start talking about Black and Jewish history, and people are saying, "Why would Blacks and Jews, even if they're living in the same neighborhood, be interested in one another?" I can go back to the fact that the Chicago Exposition [World's Columbian Exposition or Chicago World's Fair], one of the cities considered for that exposition was New York and they proposed to move it to Central Park. The southern end of Harlem was just starting to be developed over to the Hudson River. They started saying, oh, the Heights could be the Acropolis of Manhattan and we'll have part of the fair there, down to the river. And then we didn't get it. It's just like Hudson Yards, Hudson Yards was talked up for the Olympics; it didn't happen. The energy [however] focused development on Hudson Yards. That's what happened in Harlem.

So now Columbia [University] wanted to come, St. John the Divine, that Beaux Arts with the grid where there's no building that focuses on the axis. Where in Harlem, Riverside Church, St. John the Divine, Grant's Tomb [General Grant National Memorial], all picked sites on Riverside Drive that allows a visible way across East Harlem and all this. I can talk about the beautiful city, the Beaux Arts aspects, by walking down 121st, 123rd Streets in Harlem and look across and

make people realize that, or the Heights.

I had to give a talk about Hamilton's house [Hamilton Grange National Memorial] and they just wanted me to talk about the house. What could it have been like? So I went to *Manahatta*, that book that looks at all the topography, and I realize oh, my God, he went to the Schieffelin family and he went to buy the land—not just the hillside but down to the river. And I realize, back then, his house at the top of that hill saw the Palisades, and the Palisades looks just like Nevis. Nevis is where he's from. It's a volcanic island with all the development along the riverfront and these sheer cliffs going up. So I realized he had some romantic relationship to the landscape.

All those things help tell a story: why the land was valuable, why the nicer apartment buildings are on the hillside facing the park, why the elevated train and the tenement houses are on the flats and all that. It's like—I have never been to Niagara Falls, but someone said, you feel the falls before you get to the falls. You can feel it in the ground. So you realize you're feeling what the Native American felt. I feel like those kind of stories, it's visceral and when it's visceral, they never lose that story. It's like a punchline to a joke. It's the intellectual letting you realize: I thought something and I was wrong and now I'm laughing at how ridiculous my thought was. They never lose it. If I can get someone on that tour, somebody to laugh and some prejudicial thinking, rather than getting mad or angry about it, if I could sort of reveal how ridiculous that is, sort of joke about it, I've gone much further than if I got into an argument about it.

Q: You said something when we were talking earlier about how a lot of Harlem history has been ghettoized—or African American history has been ghettoized to Harlem, where there's actually

been more cross-pollination with the rest of the city, which I think is what you're saying. I just wondered if you could elaborate on that.

Reddick: Right now, there's this family [Lyons]—they had some association with Seneca Village. They had the property not really to live but to rent and create revenue from. And someone told me that their house is still down in the Financial District, somewhere down there, either the building, or they know they had a house down in that area. Some people are saying if they have a connection to Seneca Village, they should put a statue down in Central Park by Seneca Village or whatever.

I remember when Seneca Village first came up, how they almost had no history about it. Now they've gained a lot more, there's some churches, they moved to Harlem and they have a connection there. There's much more about this sort of average Joe's life representing a certain number of Blacks because they owned land, they could vote. Even though it seems like a low number, against the number of Blacks that could vote in all of New York State, they were almost like ten percent of the Black voting population. [laughs]

So to me, that's a more interesting story to talk about at Seneca Village than about the people who, even though they were Black, were profiteers off of it. If their house still exists in the Financial District, to me, showing that a Black person got into the Financial District when you think it was all-white, that's a more interesting story to me, to alter people's conception, particularly in a city like New York where these things are always cross-pollinating. There's a chance to demonstrate that there was this presence outside of the obvious.

To me, that's more interesting. When you can only do little notes around the city, it's more interesting to strike a note that makes people think differently than just play to the obvious. Not to say that my cultural history is only valuable in my neighborhood but I feel like in Harlem, it really spoke to this broader accessibility about the average Joe.

My parents, who couldn't stay in any hotel when they honeymooned, stayed in the Theresa Hotel. So to talk about that in context with Fidel Castro coming up there, what it meant [for him] to be sort of a renegade in that neighborhood, and what that meant beyond having that facility, the broad-based meaning of it means more to me than a singular story. So someone who did the American thing of getting land and profiteering and taking that land and being able to not live with Black people but live in the midst of where wealth was, if somebody was able to do that in the 1800s, I'd rather hear that story told in that neighborhood, the oddity of that [story, in that] neighborhood, so people start to think that's possible, than just sticking to ghettoizing.

So right now, this whole political correctness, and not even political correctness—political agenda—where we have to make up for something that didn't happen, just saying what is a famous Black square, and "Shirley Chisholm" there. It's just like naming the streets. There's Martin Luther King Boulevard or Malcolm X. If the city really believed that they're important, then why is Malcolm X Boulevard not the whole length of Manhattan? Why is it just in my neighborhood? And why, if you look at the maintenance of that street, it looks totally different when it's Central Park West. Frederick Douglass Boulevard doesn't look the same after it becomes Central Park West.

I'd rather see equity and see it continue, and maybe have a couple other streets named for my ancestors, but that the beauty and the continuity moves through the neighborhood rather than just window dressing. Some of it, I think, is just turning into window dressing and the history is moving aside. Well, it seems to be popular history and not a deeper sense of what that history can tell. I think that's a greater challenge to be looked at and talked about.

Q: And I think there is also too that the audience—the presumed audience—for Malcolm X Boulevard or Frederick Douglass Boulevard is—

Reddick: Well, if you ghettoize it, you're making it true. [Laughs] That's the whole point!

Q: Yes, exactly.

Reddick: I have tours where inevitably someone will come up to me and we're talking. We get to the Apollo [Theater] or whatever. It's changing. They say, "I haven't been to New York or Harlem in so many years. But I came up in 1970 and I saw James Brown at the Apollo." I'm supposed to know even though they haven't said this, "Despite all the negativity about coming to Harlem, I went against that tide and I came." That's supposed to be my bonding thing with the person who said it? I want to say, "I go to the Metropolitan Museum. No one pats me on the back." Minorities go into communities all the time where they might not be welcomed to work. They get aspects of the culture and all of that. No one tells us we're exceptional or pats us on the back about it. I always want to say well, one time in twenty years isn't enough. If you really care

about bridging the gap, you have to be willing to go somewhere you think you might be uncomfortable because most likely you won't be.

African Americans know if one white person is wandering in Harlem, he's there because he's interested in my community. He either loves my community and culture or he has a lover in that community. They are treated pretty well. There's no way groups of Blacks could go to churches in white neighborhoods the way they come to African American churches just for the expectation. To this day, I don't know what they expect. The line at Abyssinian is as long as it would be for the Empire State Building. We allow you to come in and have that experience.

Some people ask me afterwards, "Is it safe to walk around?" What do you think, those people ascend into heaven and demonic people come out on the streets? But for me, I'm saddened because I go into offices now and I see less of a minority presence than it was in the 1970s. I go into architecture firms and places like that. It's appalling really, for a generation that thinks it's all over with.

When people told me with [President Barack] Obama elected, "it's now a colorless society," I said, well, let me be the one to tell you that it's changed. Just the perception isn't the same. [James] Baldwin used to say, well, show me the evidence. You tell me all these things but show me the evidence.

Q: Why do you think that there is less of a minority presence, or less integration, than there was in the '70s and '80s, in architectural firms?

Reddick: Well, first of all, I always look at the post-war period and what the GI Bill did for my parents. So the Second World War, they made the same sacrifices—the Kennedys and the Bushes made the same sacrifices as my family. The Kennedys even lost a son in the war. They were entitled just like my father with the GI Bill for education or to buy a house. Nobody was selling my father a bullshit house. He maybe couldn't live in any neighborhood but they didn't say it was because of the readiness of the mortgage there, or get me a Trump University diploma.

And if you can look back to the Civil Rights Movement, part of why we were able to advance is because we had the credentials. They had become teachers. They had become accountants. They had the tools to move forward. So whether you were Italian or Irish or Jewish or Black, you could take advantage of those things and go to City College, do whatever. My uncle went to Howard University with David Dinkins. All those people were able to move forward from equity.

So by the time I went to Yale for example, I was ready to graduate and I was number six in the draft. That was my draft number. I was like oh, my God, I'm going to get drafted to a one. All my rich classmates, they couldn't figure out why I was worried. They go, "Don't you have a doctor? Don't you have an allergy? Don't you have bone spurs?" That sense of everybody being in it, I'm not just talking being in it, putting lip service to it. There was a kind of evenness [post-World War II opportunity] in all of that, to allow for an advancement and for our parents to all aspire for us to do better. I was going with working-class white kids, who were just as enthusiastic, with shots to go to Yale.

I had a reunion with my classmates from Yale. My graduate education, I had some scholarship. I paid for everything. I had a little debt afterwards. We could not remember what our tuition was. That was not the barrier to going. It was the exams and getting in and all this.

So I do feel sorry for this current generation because that sense of fairness was built into the system a certain way. I'm not saying it was perfect or all that, but there were certain things about equity. Like all those bank loans, the people who talk someone into them; no poor Black man or Hispanic came in and asked for a balloon mortgage. Someone talked him into that. They didn't want to know your salary. If you said you were an architect, they went to the median salary for architects and that's what they wrote in on the bank loan. They knew they were cheating people and they didn't really care. None of them went to jail. That's not the people who they're pointing the fingers at. It's their money. Not only did they lose their house but the government bailed out the bank, and gave them that mortgage. That house got sold when the economy changed. They sold it a couple times for an increase or whatever, all on the backs of the very people whose taxes and stuff paid for it. I do hold that against Obama, that nobody went to jail for that. If they were good enough to walk in the door day one, you have to renegotiate all those mortgages.

Q: Yes, there's a whole generation of people who—that system didn't work. It was used against them in a way.

Reddick: Yes, so the bottom line, it was the same people, the same bankers and stuff. It was the grandsons of the same people who gave the mortgage loans to my parents. I'm not saying they

could get into any neighborhood or whatever, but there was a fairness in the quality of the housing and the stuff you could get. It wasn't like they were just giving you something that was going to collapse tomorrow. They were getting into a house that you knew you could pay the mortgage for.

Q: Yes, that's a huge difference. And maybe this goes back to one of the things we were talking about just before this, were you involved also in Tin Pan Alley? Can you talk about that?

Reddick: I was. I would say George Calderaro who was very active in historic preservation, he had been involved in a lot of Harlem cultural groups. I've known him socially and professionally for a very long time. He lives in the area of Tin Pan Alley, has been very much an activist.

I've become a Columbia Community Scholar. It's a program that was negotiated as part of the Community Benefits [Agreement], a three-year program. George is with the continuing education department [School of Professional Studies]. When I completed my cycle, I was one of the first, or the first, to give a talk about my research and my interests in Black and Jewish music culture, and he orchestrated that for me. He was so good about getting press and all that, I started calling him Swifty for [Irving Paul] Swifty Lazar, the agent. He was so energetic. He said, "John, I want you to come in. We're trying to bring back to the Landmarks Commission this effort to move Tin Pan Alley."

And I went and started talking about the Black and Jewish connection. For my research, I had all this sheet music. It had those addresses on it. I could show Black composers and all of that. I'm

going to say it was all the changing tide, but it was a new director at the Landmarks and they were willing to sit down and listen. They could see it was advancing. They called me in to talk a little bit about it.

But then the kicker was when they started having testimony, the developer—I wish I could remember. When we correct this, I'm going to give you the actual name of the historian but they hired a hired gun historian, Alburn or Albert [Andrew Alpern] and he wrote testimony. I believe he had twelve images of sheet music and he picked all the most horrible images, like the cartoony images of the period. Almost eight of those pieces of sheet music were actually African American composers. Maybe four of them actually had their picture on the cover of the sheet music.

The fact that he was going to take my history, use it to shame either whites that didn't know or felt nervous speaking up without no Black members in the audience to rally around it, or make Black people who weren't aware of it to look at some of those pictures and go, "Oh, this is horrible." In reality, the fact that their name was printed on it and that maybe this one time, they had to tolerate that, but if that song became famous, the person wouldn't go to the music publisher. They would go to John Reddick or Lou Smith or whoever was the composer. It was their first chance for them to be acknowledged for what they did.

So some of those guys would talk about, in the old days: you would go, they'd like your tune, they'd pay you twenty-five dollars and you were done with it. And Noble [Lee] Sissle and [James Hubert] Eubie Blake used to say, "If they liked my song and they gave me twenty-five

dollars, I went and sold that same song to five other music publishers, let them fight it out." So the fact that he did that, I found that to be so reprehensible, him in his well-tailored suits. Here I am, nothing. I'm getting paid nothing to be there and he probably got tens of thousands of dollars to write reports. He so twisted my history.

And so writing that rebuttal to me was one of the great efforts. And Sarah, I can't think of Sarah's last name [Moses], who read the—when they decided they were going to calendar it, to move it forward for landmarking and they had to read to the commissioners justification for why, the African American young lady on the staff read it. And to know the tenor of what she was reading and how they use the African American part, dealing with it and taking it and showing it as a benefit for the community, I felt that was the greatest teaching lesson I had. And I felt she was armed—she had said even the complexity for her, even though they wanted to do it, the things she had to listen in house, blah, blah, blah. I felt I armed another soldier in the battles. It was a nice feeling. There's just so much of it and so few of us in the profession. Everything is like this; you feel like everything is a heavy lift.

To me, with all the things we were talking about—all this engagement—no one has approached me ever about being on the teaching staff of any institution in New York. They want me to talk to their students. They want me to validate some research they've already done that might have some overlap in Harlem—if I can read this or that. But it's the same thing. I can say the same argument as anybody else, I see other people out of nowhere get jobs or are doing things.

George is the only one where I feel there was real genuine sort of professional engagement back

and forth. I know if there was a fight, I could call him up. Even when I was working for Abyssinian Development Corporation, Columbia and City College both had programs that were around planning. You could go to those programs and they would do statistical research to help the development corporations write grants, make their argument at other levels. Both of those schools have none of those programs anymore; they're gone. Historic preservation at Columbia has never done one report. I've asked for students to do things. They said, "Well, John, students expect to get paid. They're not going to do it for free."

Q: I'd like to talk about the LGBT sites, the movement to recognize and possibly preserve sites that are significant to LGBT history. So I want to talk about what NYPAP has documented so far and ask you to weigh in on that, and welcome you to critique it also. So a few of the people that we interviewed were involved in a specific project, the OLGAD [Organization of Lesbian and Gay Architects + Designers] map of sites. That was in the early '90s. So I was wondering what were you doing at that time, and were you aware of that particular project? What sense did you have about preserving LGBT sites at that time?

Reddick: Well, Michael Henry Adams for a long time has been looking at the LGBT culture in Harlem. And both of us got to be very friendly with a [photographer] gentleman named Marvin Smith. There were two brothers, Morgan and Marvin Smith, twin brothers, one was gay and one wasn't. Marvin Smith was still alive and they did a big show at the Schomburg [Center for Research in Black Culture] and they had a book out. It's very funny. I was coming out of the Schomburg from seeing the exhibition and Mr. Smith is coming in. I go, "Oh, my goodness, that's Mr. Smith." So I backtracked and came in behind him to say oh, you're Mr. Smith, I saw

the exhibit. And he's cruising me. [Laughs] He's like in his eighties. "Oh, what do you do?" He totally lived near me and we got to be very, very friendly. He was very open to talk about what the gay culture was like and different aspects of that.

I've known other more mature guys that could have told me a little bit about it, but him and maybe Bob Phillips, who was older, could talk a little bit about the older history. For the most part, I came into New York where even though the gay culture, I wouldn't say it was out-out but the social culture in New York was so gay, the music culture and everything. If you went to Studio 54, you could be sort of closeted in a certain way and go to places that were gay and you could still say, "Well, I'm not gay. I'm just at Studio 54."

It was so much more integrated, even more than now in a certain way in terms of the high popular culture that so embraced aspects of the gay music culture and everything that it was almost seamless in certain aspects of the city where you came and went, and how things happened. People that you knew were gay were part of the social order. Even me, I came from growing up in Philadelphia and all these guys that my sister was mooning over in soap operas, all macho guys, were at all the gay bars. That was just very funny.

That's another thing about New York, the realities of the image of what was going out. And then who got picked on. Barbara Walters, she knew Calvin Klein was gay and she knew Roy Cohn. She would never expose them but she would expose Ricky Martin [Enrique Martín Morales], those kinds of people. They would pick and choose who they would put under the lens and who they wouldn't. Rosie O'Donnell, I would go to the fundraising events for Bette Midler and she

couldn't have been more crude and open about who she was in many ways. But Barbara Walters, she hired her on *The View* and all that, but she never did to her what she did to Ricky Martin. She never did that to Rosie O'Donnell. Afterwards, she acted like oh, she knew and it didn't matter. No, you never threw her under the bus the way you did people you didn't know.

Q: You didn't weaponize it when it was beneficial for you. So what did Marvin Smith tell you about the gay culture?

Reddick: Him and his brother, they worked in Central Park, at the Shakespeare Garden in Central Park, with the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. They came in the '30s, and they talking about the wealthy men that would approach them in the park. I think Marvin Smith got to go to Europe through meeting someone very wealthy. Famous actors, even, they would talk about hanging out with them at the clubs and things like that, that sort of visibility. Marvin Smith was one of these people, even to the end, you would not necessarily assume he was gay, just his demeanor and all that.

So he was talking about somebody like [the composer William Thomas] Billy Strayhorn who was much more out. He was under the umbrella and protection of Duke Ellington. He would say, "Billy Strayhorn used to make me nervous" because he was so much more out about who he was and all of that [in the 1940s and '50s]. So how everybody sort of played the system.

Even someone like Langston Hughes—to this day, you don't really know for a fact what his sexuality was. I did a talk at the Langston Hughes House and I thought that was less interesting

to me [who he slept with] than the community of LGBT people he was around. Carl Van Vechten, and all these different people that were part of his sphere of influence and how he engaged them. Certainly the LGBT culture had an imprint on him.

I went to see Fallingwater, the Frank Lloyd Wright house, and I go to the garden, there's a statue of an African American woman in the garden. I go, who is she? They tell me it's Rose McClendon. I didn't know who she was. It was the artist, [James] Richmond Barthé. At the time, I didn't know either one. When I went to look them up, both images of them were Carl Van Vechten images because he always put fabric behind the images. So his DNA was on the photographs.

Then the more I realized, well, how did that happen? Why would Frank Lloyd Wright hire—and then I find out it's the Kaufmanns who built the house. The Kaufmanns had a big store company in Pittsburgh and their son Edgar [J.] Kauffman Jr. was the one who introduced his parents to Frank Lloyd Wright. He became one of the founding collectors around decorative arts for the Museum of Modern Art. And I did know the Black sculptor out in the garden but an earlier gift he gave to his parents was a bust of himself that Barthé did. So I realize he introduced Barthé's work to his parents. He got Barthé two commissions. But they were both gay. They were in that social circle.

But he was a peer that he saw [as creatively] equal to Frank Lloyd Wright. He wasn't just a sex partner. I have no clue whether there was any sexual engagement but there was this intellectual sharing and community sharing and all of that, that doesn't gets talked about. That's the back fill

I like to see, the storytelling, this aspect of gay players, someone like Gertrude Stein when she does *Four Saints in Three Acts*. She comes in and works for all these Black artists. She rehearses in St. Phillip's [Episcopal] Church in Harlem. They see the spiritual side.

The twentieth century was about the sciences. It was also about spirituality. So there's [Sigmund] Freud looking at dreams and all of that. You look at [Pablo] Picasso's paintings before the *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. It's just very rigorous, every fold, everything. Then he goes to the museum and realizes what's considered crude was actually speaking to him. Those masters were scaring him or making him laugh, using psychology and these other things.

So the Black culture became something they were very much interested in. [Henri Émile Benoît] Matisse comes to America. With all these outsider players, that's one more bonding thing, to experience the Black experience, and where that's going to take them. There's a lot of LGBT through the arts and stuff, you look at dance and all these connections. You don't have to go far afield. You can look at the same stuff you've been looking at all along. But realize that these people weren't just sex partners. I think it gets diminished to sexual connections, and the intellectual fact that they are even in this sphere with one another, it gets diminished.

Q: And that in fact, they were peers, as artists and intellectuals.

Reddick: Yes, [architect] Philip Johnson says his first lover was an African American, a guy named [James Lesley] Jimmie Daniels who [later] was running a club called the Bon Soir at the end of his life where Barbara Streisand was getting her career started. Harold Arlen songs, he

was singing them when they were new songs, not rehabilitated songs and all of that. These people were kind of lost to history. They really had influence. When you look at the Van Vechten pictures of Phillip Johnson and Jimmie Daniels, Jimmie Daniels was far more sophisticated than Phillip Johnson, who's from Ohio, who just has a lot of money coming to New York.

Q: And when did you start putting this information that you were getting through living in Harlem and talking to people who were also part of the neighborhood, when did you start putting that out into the world, either through walking tours or through research?

Reddick: Well, I was doing architecture walking tours—I realized very early that Harlem was not Catfish Row, and that for African Americans, it was a great backdrop. The story I was telling about looking out your window and seeing the Empire State Building. The thing that James Baldwin—he was growing up in Harlem when the Empire State Building was being built. So he saw the frame go up, saw the cladding go up, saw the lights go on. It's a world-famous building that you're feeling a partnership with New York around all that kind of stuff.

So I was collecting postcards and images of Harlem, in its physical self, and I was giving tours around architecture. This woman, Yuien Chin, who's very active in preservation in Harlem was doing tours. She said, "John, I'm getting people interested in Harlem's Jewish history. You should add that to your tour." I said, "I don't want to talk about it if I don't have a hook." I'm not a good storyteller if I don't have a hook.

So she told me about this guy who wrote this book *When Harlem Was Jewish* [*1870–1930* by Jeffrey S. Gurock] and he was giving a talk on the Lower East Side. I went down to his talk and he kept talking about the Jewish displacement from the Lower East Side with the building of the Williamsburg Bridge, and the Manhattan Bridge, that took out huge sections of Williamsburg and the Lower East Side, not just for the bridge, but the approaches—the widening of the street for the approaches and all of that. It was kind of similar to why Blacks were moving up to Harlem. I talked to him about it at the end of the lecture, the tearing down of the Penn Station area, a big Black neighborhood. He was sort of uninterested, and I was kind of glad [laughs] because I didn't want this kind of rival thing. And as an architect, leaving his talk, which was on the Lower East Side, I could see it. I realize it wasn't hundreds of people but thousands of people were being displaced by this big civic project.

So I started seeing this parallel. Then I started thinking well, how could I tell this story? So I started collecting sheet music to see who worked with whom. And it's so random; it actually was telling me stuff that I wouldn't know, the cross-pollination of who was who. So say for instance, Dorothy Fields is writing *I Can't Give You Anything but Love, Baby* and it's premiering at Connie's Inn, this club in Harlem. Her father was Lew Fields of Weber and Fields who had a theater on 125th Street in Harlem at the turn of the century. She's already a second-generation theater person in Harlem. So she goes on and has a career and you think of her living on the Upper West Side; they're going to put a plaque on the Upper West Side or she's out in Hollywood. But she's meeting Lena Horne and all these people in the earliest stages of their careers, and by the time they go to Hollywood, they've all known each other from this early part of their lives during Prohibition and the '30s and all that stuff in New York.

So the Jewish neighborhood, the Black neighborhood, what was going on. And [George] Gershwin, he writes *Swanee* when he was living at 144th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue. The only *Swanee* he had seen is the Hudson River. The fact that it's all part of their DNA, and they're talking about this relationship with Harlem and the musicians and all that. The first woman to sing *Summertime* was [Abriea] Abbie Mitchell Cook and she went on some of these shows that were in the 1890s that went to Europe. Their agents were the agents who built the Apollo Theater. [Jules] Hurtig and [Harry] Seamon were their agents and Hurtig and Seamon's lease is what built the Apollo Theater. There's all these links across time that you see.

The earliest movie of "rags to riches" is called *Humoresque* and it was shot at a movie studio at Second Avenue and 127th Street in Harlem which was owned by—it was called Cosmopolitan Pictures because the owner of *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, William Randolph Hearst, owned the studio but Joseph Urban did the sets, the same guy who did the sets for *Show Boat*. *Show Boat*, the story that has a mixed race character, Julie, who's passing. But it's written by Edna Ferber who's Jewish. So she's really telling the Jewish story of passing and not just the Black story. More Jews were passing in 1920 than Blacks were passing.

So there's this affinity that I see in Harlem, this connection, and the outsiderness. My favorite song of that period is Lorenz [Milton] Hart's *My Funny Valentine* because he was short, he was bald, he was gay, he was alcoholic. And all those detriments—"Is your figure less than Greek? Is your mouth a little weak?"—was his own checklist of his demerits but everyone connects with

that. There's a president that wishes his hands were bigger. There's another candidate who probably wishes he was taller. He's connecting to that outsiderness, in that sense saying, it doesn't matter. "Don't change your hair for me. Not if you care for me." Everything you have is wonderful. That all comes out of the Harlem experience and that interconnectivity of being outsider but want to be an American.

They're like politicians. They're writing the slogan of what's going to make us all one. What are we going to give up to be that one America? Even the resentments today go back to what we gave up, self-editing. We have that resentment from the self-editing. So if you grew up in a household where your mother says, "Not German! Just English!" And now they're talking about bilingual, you have to go well, I had to learn English. It doesn't even get said. But when you go to the voting booth or whatever, those resentments about the threshold you had to cross that maybe someone else didn't to be an American, you have to do the hazing.

Q: And some people share that and other people don't.

Reddick: Or they cross over and they think now I'm an American. I'm white; I'm not Jewish anymore. Whatever those things were that were "demerits," they just shed that. And Blacks can't. So that's why those stories about passing become these sort of immigrant stories.

Q: Pardon me while I check the time. We only have about ten minutes. So I'm happy to hand that over to you, if you think there's anything you want to talk about in particular. Or I can ask some more questions.

Reddick: You can ask some more questions.

Q: Well, I want to ask you about Harlem PRIDE. I'd like to know the story of how it was formed and also the term "same-gender loving" and how that relates to Harlem in particular.

Reddick: Well, that was a new term to me until I started engaging. It seems like one of the earlier board members really felt strongly about that term. He felt that some other terms that had come out of European culture were sort of defining gayness and all of that. It was something that was new to me but I felt it was very meaningful to a lot of our audience, and we incorporated that into our title and our acknowledgment of our organization.

Our first PRIDE event was on 119th Street between Lenox [Avenue] and Fifth. A gentleman had an art gallery, Lawrence—his last name escapes me at the minute—Lawrence had an art gallery on that block. There was a lesbian restaurateur, who had a restaurant further over. It was not long after 9/11 [September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks] and you could not get another permit for a street event. You couldn't add any new events to the street.

So we knew this woman on the street who was with the Parks Department and they did a block fair every year. They hadn't done it for awhile but she had a slot, so we asked if we could use her slot to do our event. She said yes. We said we'd have hot dogs for kids on the street. That block was just starting to gentrify. It still had some issues, some drug stuff and all that. So different friends that came, a friend of mine told me, "They're just luring you on that street. They're going

to beat the people up when they get on the street." Some people couldn't believe it was an open gay event. They were just so filled with the idea that this was possible.

It really showed us there was an audience for it. There was a real appreciation for it. So we wanted to do it on that street again the next year. But after we did it that year, we had to go back in September—after the June one—go back in September and meet with the block association. When we first met with the block group, it was just a little old lady still trying to hold it together, maybe four aging ladies. But when we had to go to the one and ask if we could do it for the next year, we saw there were way more men there, all these men. I could see it wasn't going to bode well. They started saying, "Oh, when we used to have blockers, we used to have pony rides." "Oh, we could have pony rides." These were the sort of things they had ages ago, when they were kids. They didn't have this or didn't have that. "We can incorporate that." "You have a church on the block. They can do a flea market. There's all these new people; you don't get money from your own block you get it from other people." "That sounds like a good idea." And they said, "We don't mind you being here." Then they took the vote: no.

For me as an African American male, to know that they did that, even though the partner of the art gallery, the owner, who's a white guy, stood out there and cooked hot dogs and hamburgers all day long for anybody who wanted them. The smell of smoke is probably still on his clothing. I feel that was such a giving—I mean it gave something to us. I don't deny that they made it accessible to us. It brought something to their block. Maybe they couldn't sell drugs at the end of the street for that one day. They weren't supportive of it going forward if it wasn't them. Then the next year, they didn't do anything. I'm sure there's no block association now at all. Those

ladies, they're all ancient now. To see that, that was disheartening to me. It was all about gender and sexuality.

After that, we moved to—where did we go—one year, we went to Marcus Garvey Park. After that, we were in Jackie Robinson Park until we really outgrew it. Then we knew that Global PRIDE was coming to New York and we realized we needed a bigger site and we moved to Twelfth Avenue, down under the viaduct near 135th Street, where Fairway is back there. And we wanted to get there at least two years before Global PRIDE because we realized we had to get all the kinks out, and permits. And we did and we got a lot of support from NYC. The head of NYC [& Company], Fred Dixon, is LGBT. I had known him for years. He moved up through the system there, justly rewarded to be the head of NYC & Company.

So he had me do some interviews for magazines and some things around the LGBT culture, very supportive of helping us promote the event. For us, it was about building audience through social engagement but also an exchange of information because other groups, you'll see, they will put a Black ad in there or whatever, but for one issue, African Americans have to go downtown to access information, facilities, or be in an environment where certain things are more comfortably talked about. We really wanted to encourage [sexual health] testing. At all our big public events we have testing and information and other things that will really engage people in their own neighborhoods, talking about accessibility and all of that.

But it's just a small core group of us. It's really like a working board. One board member just stepped down from her job, just this year, and will make it more of a full-time effort to try to

raise more resources around management and stuff. But it's been very, very rewarding for my peer group.

We're even trying to reach out to even more younger people but I feel like it's been really appreciated. We get a great turnout every year. We do secondary events, like the talk I did at the Langston Hughes House about Langston Hughes' LGBT life, we did that. We broadly advertised it. Andrew Dolkart, a lot of people from downtown came to that event because they had never been in the house. It was a chance to be in the house. So it's talking to my group, but also it was also very important to me that we do some networking to resources outside the neighborhood because a lot of times they don't know. They're not making these kinds of connections and stuff. If I want to write a grant or do something, there's players that are on those committees that are well aware of what people are doing.

Q: And what's the ideal way in which communities with histories who have been marginalized are brought into conversations with people who have more power?

Reddick: It's just so hard because the people with the power don't really want to make a genuine effort. A friend of mine was talking to me about minority contractors in this next election cycle––how to put an agenda forward so more minority contractors get work. But most of us starting out in small businesses, city contracts are the worst things you want! Because you have to spend the money, do the work, and get reimbursed for the work. They [agencies] could drag it out. The government could just say well, I want to get more interest on the money and just not pay bills for a month because he wants more interest on money or whatever. And you can't afford to ride

that out.

So it’s really important to have a partner that makes genuine relationships. So say I’ve done work for the Central Park Conservancy. They know me. If I say, I need to get an advance, or I need you to cover this—I can’t wait until the city pays you—they have a respect for my work and each other, that they’re going to facilitate whatever that shortfall is and make it work for me. So you have to find genuine partners like that. A contractor knows he has to get ten percent minority, and you’re in the room—“he does this and I’m going to make this qualification”—he could care less whether you sink or swim. He’s done his due diligence. That’s not a relationship. That’s like his cop-out. And he’s not going to be there even though he’s like a billion dollar contractor and he could give you your five thousand dollars to meet your payroll, even though the city hasn’t paid him. He is just going to tell you, if he doesn’t like you,” I haven’t gotten my money yet. You have to wait until I get money.”

So there has to be some engagement where people are finding people they really like to work with and engage with, they want to see grow. Or find a partner that they want to see grow with them. Even if they’re a modest firm, oh, I like the work this landscape architect is doing, or I like the report this preservation person did. I mean how can you look around your offices—when you wait until the crunch to do it, it’s a resentment. And you’re doing it, you just found whoever—“I can’t find resumes,” and you bemoan, you can’t find anybody. But if you look around your office—I’ve worked in offices where a large percentage is from Syracuse because they went to Syracuse [University]. Well, okay, if you can do that for Syracuse, why can’t you look around and say well, we have to go to the schools that have predominantly Black populations or

historically Black schools and say we're looking for interns in the summer. And then you have to be willing to pay.

I had a friend who worked for NBC. She said, "Oh, John, we never get [African American] interns." It's such a great credential but they don't pay! Can you imagine me telling my father, "Oh, Dad, I got a summer internship. I'm going to be working at NBC at Rockefeller Center." He would say, "Well, John, how much are you going to get paid?" I would say, "Nothing." That means he's got to bankroll me through the whole summer to eat in the most expensive area of the city, the transportation. For a rich kid, they realize it's a benefit for the resume. They'll stay in their grandmother's apartment on Park Avenue for the summer.

If you really want to facilitate that advantage to everybody, you have to figure out a way for the disadvantaged to be able to access some of those same things. Particularly on the cultural hub—museums and everything—it's about this entitlement. They pay you nothing. Even André Leon Talley talks about working for Diana Vreeland at the Met—he just did it for nothing. He lived at the Y[MCA] but he had a bigger vision. He was going to Brown [University]. He kind of understood the value of all that but everybody doesn't. For them to make that hurdle, you have to be willing to facilitate the things that are going to make it possible for those talented people to get in.

Q: Well, I think we might have to end on that.

Reddick: That's a good note.

Q: Thank you so much, John.

Reddick: Thank you. Thank you. I’m glad it all worked out.

[END OF SESSION]