

NEW YORK PRESERVATION ARCHIVE PROJECT

The Reminiscences of
Barnett Shepherd

©2012, New York Preservation Archive Project

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Barnett Shepherd conducted by Interviewer Elin Juselius on March 30, 2012. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive 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.

Barnett Shepherd founded the Preservation League of Staten Island in the 1970s to raise awareness of the importance of saving historic buildings. Since then, he's worked to preserve Sailors' Snug Harbor, Historic Richmond Town, and various historic properties on the island. He's written several books on Staten Island history and architecture, including *Tottenville: The Town the Oyster Built*. He worked with the Tottenville Historic Society to survey 250 of historic buildings as research for the book. He also served as the director of Historic Richmond Town for nearly twenty years, during which time he oversaw the renovation of many structures and the relocation of a few historic buildings. He speaks about the difficulties preservation on Staten Island faces, both from its own communities and in generating the interest from the wider New York City.

Barnett Shepherd is Staten Island's preeminent historian and preservation advocate. A resident of Staten Island since 1972, he is the founder and first president of the Preservation League of Staten Island, the only borough-wide historic preservation organization in New York City. He is the former executive director of the Staten Island Historic Society and the former director of Historic Richmond Town, an outdoor museum that is a joint project of the Staten Island Historic Society and the City of New York. Shepherd has written several books on Staten Island history and architecture, including *Tottenville: The Town the Oyster Built* and *Sailors' Snug Harbor: 1801-1976*. He has received numerous awards for his work in preservation, including a Neighborhood Preservation Award by the Four Borough Neighborhood Preservation Alliance and a PLSI Lifetime Achievement Award. He is also a consultant for the Landmarks Preservation Commission and the Staten Island Museum.

Transcriptionist: Jackie Thipthorpe

Session: 1

Interviewee: Barnett Shepherd

Location: Staten Island, New York, NY

Interviewer: Elin Juselius

Date: 2012

Q: Can you tell us about your background and transition from minister to Art History professor to preservationist and your move to Staten Island?

Shepherd: *[Laughs]* Well, I was a Presbyterian minister for five years. Five years I was working in the church in Indiana and before that in Alabama during the racial crisis. I was very interested in the church's effort to integrate the races in the South and in our country as a whole and that attracted me to the ministry. It's one of the main features there that made me want to serve as a minister. But I found that personally it was not fulfilling after a number of years, that I really had the greater love for art and culture, and I wanted to work in the church in the theme of art and how that affects religion.

So I decided to go back to graduate school and I got a master's in art history. After having five years in seminary, I went back to school and got a master's at Indiana University. Then I taught art history at the University of Florida. So, I found living in Florida had great limitations because I really wasn't learning anything and I wasn't content to go back to school immediately and I wanted to be in New York where everything is happening in the art world and really understand better before I go on with my career.

So, I had friends that live on Staten Island, George McLean [*phonetic*] and his wife, Tilda Norberg, who were also ministers. They were Methodist ministers. I called them up and they invited me to dinner and I came over and I moved in with them and lived with them for five years.

Q: Oh, that's great. [*Laughs*]

Shepherd: And that's right here in this same neighborhood. They still live here right across the street over that way. At that time, it was 1972, and there were eight adults who lived in the house, in George and Tilda's house and we all had seminary education. All were protestant clergy but we didn't have churches but we were interested in religion and the role of the church in society. And it was a wonderful place. I wanted to live in New York but I didn't have a job and it was a wonderful environment for me to try to find my footing in what I wanted to do.

But, at that time, I was painting as an artist full time, I mean that's what I wanted to do, but I soon ran out of money [*laughs*]. So I had to get a job—am I going on too long? I worked part-time in Wall Street as a legal typist and the janitor of the Unitarian Church next door. Then when I was free, I wrote *The History of Sailors' Snug Harbor* [*Sailor's Snug Harbor, 1801-1976*] and that got me interested in Staten Island history and architectural history in particular.

I was always interested in architectural history when I was at Indiana University and I found that no one else had studied these wonderful buildings here at Snug Harbor and that was a wonderful entrée for me. I figured that I could get a job in the field if I would do public—if I would make a

publication, you know, get my name in writing. So I published articles and then I published the book and then I got a job at the Staten Island Museum and my theme, my work there, was architectural history. I did a major exhibition on Staten Island architecture and did walking tours. It was then that I realized that we needed a preservation organization on Staten Island. There was none. The Staten Island Historical Society was interested in preservation but mainly as it related to their own property. So I got my friends, and especially professionals and younger people, together and we created The Preservation League of Staten Island to lobby and to create awareness of the importance of saving historic buildings.

Q: And what was the situation at the time in Staten Island regarding attitude towards historic sites and the preservation movement in general?

Shepherd: When we started founding the working—?

Q: The Preservation League.

Shepherd: Yes. I think it was in um—I think it was about 1978 I think is when we began The Preservation League. Well, the situation was very grim, we were often discouraged for a long time, and in many ways, we still are discouraged. But in the 1980s and '90s, not one elected official was interested in preservation and there was a great fear of the landmarks designation and no one wanted to talk to us or to support our efforts. It was very, very discouraging. There were just a few individuals who understood what preservation was all about and we sort of came

together *[laughs]*. But this situation has changed somewhat but still Staten Island is very provincial when it comes to historic preservation.

Most people here are new homeowners who are living in—even the ones living in Victorian houses are new to the community. It's very often their first ownership, their first house that they have owned, they're raising their children, and they're very centered in their families. Also, Staten Island is heavily Roman Catholic and the Roman Catholic Church has never been particularly helpful in supporting of landmark designation, for whatever reason. It seems a shame.

We found success in giving awards to people who have restored their houses properly and by lobbying when designations come up. We would always speak at the [New York City] Landmarks [Preservation] Commission and we gave seminars and programs to bring people into the community who knew more about preservation. The organization still goes on today but we don't have a large base of support and we don't have much money and so it's very uphill. It's an uphill battle.

Q: You mentioned Sailors' Snug Harbor.

Shepherd: Yes.

Q: When did you begin researching the Harbor and how did you become involved with the Staten Island Museum? You mentioned—

Shepherd: Yes. Well, I started in 19—about 1972. And we'll stop just for a moment.

[INTERRUPTION]

Shepherd: Now, what were you asking me about, just Snug Harbor?

Q: That's right. Yes.

Shepherd: Well, it was so remarkable that in this one site still there, you know, were all these buildings from the nineteenth century, remarkable buildings, and I knew this was a topic that was worthy of spending a lot of time to research. But the most remarkable thing to encourage me in my research was when I went to the administrative headquarters of Sailors' Snug Harbor—which at that time was in Manhattan near Washington Square where they owned a lot of property—the administrator there took me downstairs and opened the vault and I walked into the vault as big as this room, maybe twelve feet square, and there on the shelves were 105 volumes of bills paid. So, every time they hired anybody or paid anybody there was a record of it in these volumes.

I could sit there day after day looking at these first late Eighteenth Century and then Nineteenth Century bills paid and I found the original architect, you know there, being paid, Minard Lafever, and this was really exciting. That became my first paper that I wrote about Snug Harbor being re-attributed.

Q: Can you talk a bit more about the significance of these findings?

Shepherd: Yes. Well, it's one of the great Greek revival complexes in America. It's kind of—to say that is slightly simplifying the case because the site was added to over the years so it's not really a Greek revival site per se. But the first three buildings, and some other minor structures, were, you could say, were in the Greek style and Minard Lafever is a very famous proponent of that style who published many books. Before I did this work, no one knew that he was involved there and this was his earliest assignment. The trustees of Snug Harbor put an ad in the newspaper for an architect to design a building for them, he won the competition and was paid fifty dollars. He designed the first three buildings very much in the Greek style, similar to Girard College in Philadelphia and some other important Greek-style complexes.

But as the years went on, buildings were added at Snug Harbor and they each followed the style of their own time period but they kept the continuity of the layout of the original row of three buildings and so now, we have a row of five buildings. So the ones on the ends are really better called Italianate or Classical revival. They modified the original three also so now it's really a Classical Revival complex. Even the building that was built as late as 1917, the recreation hall, follows a general idea of Classical architecture but in a Beaux-Arts sort of theme or style of grandeur.

Q: Yes.

Shepherd: So, the site is wonderful because the eighty acres that are preserved today it's very unusual to have that much space in Manhattan—in Staten Island—in New York and to have the original buildings within that landscape setting is really a very special thing.

Q: When you got involved, the Museum was planning on relocating to this site.

Shepherd: Yes.

Q: How did that shape your research?

Shepherd: Well, the first thing the director of the Museum asked me to do was to do the Music Hall—to do the history of the Music Hall, because they wanted to use that building in their programming. So that directed me toward that project. I found in the archives all the bills that they had paid, the musicians who performed in the Music Hall [*laughs*] so I was able to make a list of the performances that were held there in the late—in the 1890s and early 1900s.

I sort of shifted—after doing that paper on the Music Hall, I sort of shifted away from Snug Harbor and saw the need for understanding all of Staten Island's architecture, and we began the survey project jointly with the Landmarks Commission. We were able to get a grant from New York State Council on the Arts and other people and we worked for two years. We drove down every street on Staten Island making notes of any buildings that we thought were interesting architecturally. Then we asked people in the museum community to help us and we developed a survey form and all the volunteers were assigned certain streets and they all went around and

filled out these forms and other volunteers took photographs of all these people—all these houses.

We did about twenty-five hundred buildings and we, for the more impressive ones, we did research and all of this information is now available in the Museum archives. It's used a lot—people who are newcomers and buy historic houses, that's one of the resources that they can go to see what we had to say about it when we did this survey. Out of the survey came an exhibition and a publication. This was the first professional really analysis of Staten Island's historic architecture, especially of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century.

Here on Staten Island during the early days of the Historical Society and the Museum, there was more interest in the Colonial period and the founder of Historic Richmond Town. Mr. [Loring] McMillen and his colleagues really focused on the earliest period, the seventeenth and the eighteenth century, and particularly the houses of the period. A lot of work that he had done I'm still using today. But his focus was in the earlier period and our focus was in the more recent time and the reuse of historic buildings. In the 1980s, the word—what's the word *[laughs]* I can't think of it—adaptive use, you know, that was like something kind of new at that time and that's what we kept pushing in the Preservation League that he adapted reuse of historic buildings.

Right now, just yesterday or this last week, at Columbia University's [Historic] Preservation program, one of the teachers there asked me to help with a project they're going to adopt, Port Richmond, as the theme. That's a local community here on the north shore. And they're going to

try to study all the commercial buildings in the shopping district called Richmond Avenue and I'm going to give a talk to them and help guide them in their research. They want to propose a revitalization project for the avenue—how they would, as planners and preservationists, how they would revitalize this area.

Q: Right. Can you discuss your work as executive director of the Staten Island Historical Society? How has the Society evolved over time?

Shepherd: Well, when I became *[clears throat]*—excuse me—when I became the director in 1981—before that, I was the registrar in 1979 or '80, I think. When I left the Staten Island Museum when the funding for my job ran out after five years, then I went to Historic Richmond Town as the registrar. It was a very troubled situation with a lot of antagonism between the board of directors and the executive director. They asked me if I would become the interim director and they asked the director to leave. They asked me to fill in and they knew me because of my work in The Preservation League. That's—the president of the board was a supporter of The Preservation League and she knew my work and that's how she—I guess she felt confidence in asking me to do that.

My job then as the director was very much involved with peacemaking and trying to re-establish the credibility of the organization, which had been in the news—front page of the newspaper for a long time as being in trouble with their staff and not only the one director of my time but others also.

I was able to make peace among the board and get some new people on the board and to make peace with the staff who were still there, and to begin planning—a big focus on planning and working with the city who owns the property to get projects funded through the capital project. And to finish up grants that had been given that never fulfilled and getting a good track record back in.

We saw our strategy as with private funding we would restore individual buildings using some of the staff and others and then with city funding we would work on major planning and major infrastructure projects, such as the water—sewers and water and bathrooms and streets and lighting and all the things that were needed there. We saw that as appropriate for the city's capital budget. Then we began—when I became the director, we were already in the middle of restoring the Historical Museum and I raised the money to finish that and it was really a wonderful exhibit. It's called Made on Staten Island that the curators had begun and completed and it received awards as being an outstanding history museum exhibition and parts of it's still there today.

We also then focused on individual buildings restoring the Voorlezer's House, which was the oldest building, 1695, and we restored the [Third County] Courthouse and oh, many other projects. But one of the big issues was our collection's storage and we got capital—city funding for that. That took seven or eight years to get the building built but it was finally achieved and is in use today. And we store there our furniture collection, which is a large—physically the largest part of our collection other than the buildings.

This work goes on. But in the last—in recent years, the last ten years, the city budgets have been shrinking every year and it's very, very difficult right now because of the decreased number of staff at Historic Richmond Town so that most of the restoration of individual buildings has been slowed down. I'm working with the director there, Ed Wiseman, and things are stable and are moving in the right direction but it's been difficult for them.

Q: Can you talk a bit more about the ideas behind the management of Historic Richmond Town?

Shepherd: Say it again, the what?

Q: The ideas behind the management of the site of Historic Richmond Town.

Shepherd: Yes. Well, our main problem with the site was our relationship with the neighborhood. It was a very strange relationship because it's a traffic center. It's a crossroads. That's why Richmond Town was created in the late Eighteenth Century. It's a crossroads of two major streets, cross-island and north and south island. On the books since the 1950s, was a project to re-route the traffic around the historic area instead of going through the middle of the historic area and I was—I made this my top priority to get this back on track and it caused an enormous furor among the neighbors who did not want any more traffic in their neighbor. They thought that if we made this loop or this circumnavigating road that went around, this would make it more attractive for people to travel in this area and would draw more cars. Particularly the St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church did not want any more cars driving in front of their street and they organized a heavy lobbying effort to kill this project and it was just very, very,

very, very difficult. Different officials supported it and finally were worn down by it and opposed it and are in the process of redesigning this project.

But I feel that this was the greatest problem—grave problem for Richmond Town, which was conceived to be a self-contained historic environment so that the roadways and the landscape and everything would be put back the way they were in the earlier time periods. But now with these cars whizzing through, it's very—it's a different kind of place altogether. Whether this roadway will ever be built or not, no one knows. It's such a touchy topic. But I guess there are plans afoot to do this or to do that. But it was—this was the single most difficult and discouraging thing about life on Staten Island and life at Richmond Town that there was so little support for historic preservation that it's really—

Now, what has happened though lately, and let's say in the last fifteen years, is the rising development of the island in residential communities and housing. For a decade, we were the fastest growing county in New York State and we still are among the highest ones. It's diminished a little bit but we're still very much growing. This has actually turned in a way to be in our favor because many people see fears of increased development, more people, more strain on the schools, more strain on sewers and all public services. So preservation has become more interesting as an alternative to over-development. But The Preservation League has not been able to really capture that. But that is a factor that is growing now and helping. Maybe as another decade goes by, and congestion continues and increases, maybe there will be more sympathy for retaining the historic environment and not letting it all go.

Right now, one of the top issues for The Preservation League is the old Staten Island Hospital [Samuel R. Smith Infirmary], which is a large French-style chateau with four conical towers—a brick building built in 1886—which is falling down from neglect. We're trying to get the city to intervene and purchase the building and restore it but it's deteriorated greatly. And there's a very complex issue of ownership, who owns this private property and so forth. But that's one of the projects that's very hot right now is to try to save the—it was the called The Smith's Infirmary and then later called the Staten Island Hospital.

Q: You mentioned that the majority of the houses or buildings in Richmond Town were moved there from other locations.

Shepherd: Not the majority but some of them.

Q: Some.

Shepherd: Yes.

Q: And some people say the houses—that the houses that have been moved there have lost much of their original context and significance. What are your thoughts on this?

Shepherd: Yes. Well, I think I agree that it is much more desirable not to move a historic building. We all agree on that. But on the other hand, if the building is slated for demolition, you

know, it is something worthy of this second strata of preservation, which is to move a building as the last resort, method of last resort.

While I was there, we moved one building and I would never want to do it again *[laughs]* because it was extraordinarily complex and expensive and everything. But what a building. I mean when I go to that building I just love it and I'm so glad we did it and it's just a fabulous document, a beautiful—one of the most beautiful buildings of Historic Richmond Town or even on Staten Island. I believe that there are factors that come to play where moving as a last resort is worthy.

At Richmond Town, one of the main ideas that we developed in our long-range plan was to separate in the minds of the public the original historic site from the area where buildings have been moved in from other nearby locations. In our plan, we have three areas. One is the core of the historic village where the buildings are in situ. One is an area of farm buildings that had been moved there from nearby areas two or three miles in the area. Another is the eighteenth century, which is the original part of Richmond Town.

I think this made it less of a hodgepodge to interpret to the public that Historic Richmond Town is a real place. I mean it has a history beginning *[clears throat]*—excuse me—in the eighteenth century—with the Voorlezer's House in the late seventeenth century as a crossroads village. All of that archeology is still there in the ground where that—the original site. I applied to put the whole site on the National Register of Historic Places and it was never acted on because there is this prejudice against moved buildings. But I was trying to show them that there are parts of

Richmond Town, which are—well, all of it is still a historic site but only parts of it are occupied by moved buildings. Other parts of it are in the original location, which is very rich in archeological history as well as the built history of the buildings that are still standing there.

This was, I think, a major accomplishment and I'm still hoping some day that people will have less—as time goes on, there will be less prejudice against moved buildings because this is just a wonderful thing to have a building from 1810 entirely together even though it's been moved away from its—and when we moved it, we spent a lot of time doing archeology all around the original house before it was moved and wrote up and analyzed all of our findings and photographed and measured everything. So it was done in a wonderful way, a wonderfully professional way.

While I say I wouldn't want to do it again, I guess to save that building I probably would do it again. But I wouldn't want to do it unless it's just something overwhelmingly important, because I think Richmond Town doesn't need any more buildings. It's got something like twenty-five already and to add others is just confusion. But this one building that we moved had been in the plan since the beginning in the 1950s and we had a place for it in that area where there was all farm buildings.

Q: How do you attract visitors to Richmond Town? What do you hope a visitor leaves with?

Shepherd: Say it again, please.

Q: How do you attract visitors to Richmond Town?

Shepherd: Track visitors?

Q: Attract.

Shepherd: Attract visitors. *[Clears throat]*

Q: What do you hope that a visitor leaves with after visiting?

Shepherd: *[Laughs]* Well, probably I'm not the right one to ask because I haven't been there for ten years *[laughs]*. But when I was there, we worked with the New York City Convention Bureau and the Tourism Bureau and we worked in coordination with the [New York] Council on the Humanities to promote Staten Island—visitors to Staten Island. It's a very uphill battle because of our location, thirty minutes away from the ferry terminal, and because public transportation is not the most pleasant. If you get on the bus at the ferry terminal, it takes you about almost forty minutes to get to Historic Richmond Town. But visitors do it all the time—they get there but it's just a handful of people.

We tried having a shuttle bus and never got enough riders. Because of the need for advertising, you need a major amount of budget for advertising if you're going to let people know that this service is available and transportation is so expensive. But I would like to say there is a new development here on Staten Island. Our borough president, [James P.] Molinaro, has that booth

in the ferry terminal, which is beautifully designed with all the literature and information and manned on the weekends to encourage people to get on the bus and to go out there and to visit other museums on Staten Island. There is continuing hope to capture tourists to bring them to Richmond Town, and they do come, but it is a struggle.

What I feel, having been through this for many years, is that the cultural institutions really have—on Staten Island—have to focus on our island and our regional—and our close region for their visitation. We have to continue to improve our presentations and strengthen our facilities so that they are attractive to off-island visitors. With being so close to Manhattan, which has world-class facilities, it's very, very competitive. People who come here only after they've come to the city three or four times begin looking at the boroughs as a place that they can visit.

I feel that Staten Island with its increased interest in the waterfront and its major rehabilitation of waterfront areas is making Staten Island more and more attractive to off-island visitors and they will discover that this is a wonderful place to visit and to live gradually. This however, since Richmond Town is right in the middle of Staten Island, seven miles away, we don't benefit from that too much except as a residual to those people who enjoy the waterfront. We'll be able to capture their attention as they come to the waterfront.

But this is one thing I feel very happy about on Staten Island that our borough president—the last two borough presidents have seen fit to put money in restoring the boardwalk, the FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt] Boardwalk on the south shore. It's become a very, very attractive place both for local residents and for people who visit to walk on the boardwalk and to eat in the restaurants

there and to swim and to enjoy the beach. All of that with the help of the Parks Department [New York City Department of Parks and Recreation] has been revitalized. A new fishing pier, for example, has been built, and a new facility at the Conference House Park, and now we are lobbying to get the north shore waterfront, here where we are today, opened to the public and the community board is very strongly and supportive of this waterfront project here on the north shore both for historical tourism and for just joggers and people who enjoy an area to walk and to be uninterrupted by traffic. It's really coming along. And in Stapleton on the east shore, the whole former port area is being redeveloped with a waterfront esplanade.

I feel like this is really a wonderful improvement on Staten Island to regain our access to the waterfront. It will attract more tourists and attract more people to come and live here who want to care for the historic buildings that are still standing here. That sort of got off your question a bit—but—

Q: No. That's great.

Shepherd: —how do we attract visitors I think you said. Yes.

Q: Yes. What inspired your interest in Tottenville? Can you discuss your work on the yearlong survey of 250 historic buildings in Tottenville?

Shepherd: Twenty-five—we did—

Q: Two hundred and fifty.

Shepherd: No, we did a lot more than that.

Q: Oh.

Shepherd: Yes. I was attracted to Tottenville because it's a town with all of the aspects of not just residential buildings but commercial buildings, religious buildings, and industrial buildings. I thought that this would be a wonderful study of how a town develops from the beginning and into the present. This has been a transition from a small town [*coughs*]—small self-contained town with its own industry and own cultural institutions and everything to a modern suburb, which in our lifetime it's rapidly becoming a commuter suburb with the opening of the South Shore and the infrastructure of sewers and other facilities being made available to the farthest part of the South Shore down there at Tottenville.

I chose it because I could see a great variety in the architectural history and the buildings that survived and I wanted to desperately to get those people that live in Tottenville to understand what they have and to speak in favor of it. We were given a grant by our city councilman at that time, Michael [E.] McMahon, given to The Preservation League, and I chose Tottenville for those reasons that I just spoke to do this survey. When we went—when I went there to work, we co-sponsored the effort with the Tottenville Historical Society. And this is a young organization. I think they're now about less than ten years old and they had a wonderful core of volunteers. So, I realized right away that they could assist with this project of understanding the history of their

town. And it turned out to be just a great relationship with that local organization to make it work.

We drove down every street in Tottenville and made notes and photographed and we decided—I think we came up with—oh, gosh, it's in the back of the book. I can't remember. Did you say 250 buildings? I think maybe—

Q: Historic buildings.

Shepherd: Maybe that's what it is. I'm sorry. I get mixed up a little bit. Anyway, it was an awful lot of buildings [*laughter*]. And because our building department records were apparently destroyed by fire in 1917, we can't find them and we don't know exactly what happened but they're not there. It's very tedious to do research on historic buildings. The only way I know as a professional is through the land records, the deeds, in the [Richmond] County Clerk's office. So our work there, it took three years but we did the research on the deeds for all those houses, as you say, about over two hundred buildings. I trained some of the people there but I did most of them myself. By doing the deed work, we could determine the original—the approximate original date of the structure, the original owner, and the owner's vocation. And by doing that for all those buildings, I got a sense of the chronology of the development of the town. In the 1820s, it was just a forested area—there was no town there at all. So it's a town that came into being in the 1830s and rapidly expanded into an industrial area of shipbuilding and other waterfront activities and grew to be the largest town on the South Shore of Staten Island.

It's rather discouraging for the people that are working there now because several—two recently designated landmark buildings have been mutilated by their owners, ignoring the landmarks designation. It's just awfully discouraging and annoying to see such misunderstanding of one's ownership of a building. It's so discouraging that there is not more community awareness to prevent this sort of desecration of historic properties. But we keep working and hoping that this awareness will then grow and we will save more of our history of buildings and ideas.

I'm working on a new project right now it's called—I'm writing a book called the *Staten Island Scenery 1679 to 1900: Paintings, Prints, Drawings and Photographs*. I'm analyzing all the images that show the Staten Island landscape. Later, if I'm able, I'm going to do a book on architecture specifically but this is a book on imagery and I'm hoping that this will teach us how the island has developed and historically what the landscape looked like. One of the key ideas is the importance of the waterfront. This comes through in almost fifty or sixty percent of every picture that's ever been made is the waterfront [*laughs*]. I'm very happy that we are finally at long last getting our waterfront back so that people have access to it.

But what I've learned from doing this also is the tremendous cultural history that we have here of—especially in the golden period of suburbanization in the mid and late Nineteenth Century. The people that were living here were just outstanding citizens both in commerce, in Wall Street and in—they were naturalists, they were professional artists—every imaginable vocation, people that had wonderful ideas and had succeeded in their various fields of endeavour. We can capture all of this history through our images that have survived. And with the help of the internet, now I can find all these things. It's just—no one before could have ever done that. It would take a

lifetime and I can do it in probably a year or a year or two. I find images in San Francisco, in museums, and Boston [Museum of] Fine Arts, in Iowa. I can find things about the most obscure people, you know, that nobody else even remembers on Staten Island that they ever lived here. It's really wonderful.

I feel so privileged that I have been here and able to do this and make these connections and am given the time to do it. I'm not being rushed and nobody is pushing me. But they're very appreciative of what I'm doing. The book is going to be sponsored by the Staten Island Museum and the Staten Island Historical Society and the Staten Island Foundation is going to pay for everything, which is really wonderful. The other three books that I worked on, I had to beg my friends, you know, to give them money to get them published. But now with the bank foundation taking—picking up the tab it will be a new *[laughs]* a new wonderful feeling.

I hope that I'll do another book on architecture to show both the lost buildings and the buildings that are still here from the beginning to the present. I know the most about that than anything. As you work in one place for a long time, you build up connections. I can call on so many people to help me to find certain things. It's just really rewarding and fun.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about the book *Tottenville: The Town the Oyster Built*?

Shepherd: Well, that's what I was talking about doing the survey of Tottenville and developing the history of it. It was a wonderful—for those people in that community to be interested in their own history and to be excited by it. This was really very encouraging to me to pick that town and

then to find that the young people were working there in the Historical Society. Linda Cutler Hauck wrote a letter to her membership—I think she has 250 members—they raised twenty thousand dollars within a few months to pay for the book and it sold out. We had one thousand copies in hardcover and now they're selling the paperback. The whole idea of doing the book was to increase awareness of the importance of history and their buildings in that town. I can only hope that this will help but it's really an uphill battle.

I spent three years doing the survey, taking the photographs, studying everything and then probably the third year I was writing the book and sharing it with the Historical Society so we get everything right. I think it's really an outstanding example of doing a history of a local community. To have three years to work on something like that is just a real benefit, you know. Not everybody gets that kind of a plum that you can really do it thoroughly. That's why I feel really happy about that.

Q: So, you spent nearly thirty years working on the restoration on the [Judge] Jacob Tysen House on Staten Island.

Shepherd: *[Laughing]*

Q: What has this project entailed and what made you decide to undertake it? What is the scope of the restoration work?

Shepherd: *[Laughs]* Well, at first, this building was very derelict when I came to the community. I told you I came in '72 and my friends were right across the street. I saw it from the beginning and I always loved it, because the columns were leaning and paint was peeling and all that. I—when I worked at—I got the Preservation League going so I got acquainted with some of the leaders in the community. I said to the president what—to a member of the board who owned this house, The Historical Society, I said, “I would love to live there if it ever comes available.” And she said, “Good.” So, she made it possible. When the old man that was living here, who was an employee of Snug Harbor, finally left, so I came along.

Actually, it was—the work on the house was started just before I came on the scene. The process of doing—getting the work lined up—but the work hadn't actually started. But, anyway, we got the students of McKee High School [Ralph R. McKee Career & Technical Education High School], which is a local trade school, and their teacher took on the house as a project. They worked here for two years. They got all the windows and doors to work and to close the building and they put in all new plumbing and all new electrical and got the furnace going. Then when I came along, while that was going on, then Nick [Dowan] and I moved in here and then we refinished the interior surfaces ourselves and with other people helping us.

All the money that has been spent, other than at McKee, has really been basically my personal money, and I've spent almost two hundred thousand fixing the interior and stabilizing the house. Richmond Town put a new roof on it thirty years ago. But because we have so many buildings at Richmond Town to take care of—and other places too—this was always neglected and is still neglected. But we're hoping that *[laughs]* money will come through and the board of the

Historical Society will see fit to put money here in this house. I'm hoping and hoping that we will eventually get the exterior restored.

Really, what I focused on was making the building stable and livable, because if no one lived here, or the wrong person lived here, it would be messed up, because the interior is almost one hundred percent original. It's not—when it was owned by Sailors' Snug Harbor, they never neglected the building. It never leaked. The plaster is original. All the—in the big rooms the coving is still original. So it's a remarkable example of the Greek revival style. We think it was built in 1835 by a local judge, civic court—civil court Judge Jacob Tysen.

I got an estimate to do the portico because the four columns are in dire need of work and it was \$150,000. We've just never—Richmond Town has never seen fit to put that much money into it. So, it's kind of in limbo but hope springs eternal *[laughs]* that it will be restored eventually.

When we finish this interview, I'll show you the column that's in the basement.

Q: Oh!

Shepherd: It's really interesting.

Q: Oh, wow!

Shepherd: It's a composite style like Corinthian style only composite is even more elaborate. We took two of the columns down to protect them from the weather and just put them in the basement. But the parts are all here and some day they'll be put back.

Q: That's great. Now you've also undertaken the restoration of the Boardman-Mitchell House. What will this project entail and how do you foresee working on the restoration?

Shepherd: Yes. Well, Boardman-Mitchell was owned by my friend Lelia Roberts and for twenty years she really didn't do anything and it became quite derelict. I took—helped care for her for the last three, four years of her life and we became best friends and she got to know my family and my aunts and uncles and things like that. When she died, she bequeathed me her house. She gave it to me because she knew I wanted to take care of it and I would do it and so that's what I—that was my goal to take care of it. I didn't really want to live there myself because I love living here and I want to see this project through to the end.

I first—I had to clean the house, because she had dogs and it was a terrible mess and she had not been able to do housekeeping. With the animals being there, no one else really wanted to come in there and help her. It was really a two-year project of cleaning a house *[laughs]*.

The first thing that we did was put on a new roof, to put in a new heating system, to restore the doors and windows properly by historic preservation standards. All of that took more than two years. But I did sell the house. I found a new owner who is very keen on continuing the restoration. He is now living there with his family. So it's a happy ending.

One of the things that I did that is worthy I think of preservation is I found the original front doors in the basement. They had been taken away in the twentieth century and we put the original doors back—had to make the opening, the frame opening and put the doors back and they fit perfectly. Now the new owner has restored the soffits and the fascia and has restored the stone wall, the retaining wall in the front and made other improvements.

One of the big things I did also was to put the garden back, to restore the garden, because I'm a gardener. I did that myself, hands on, and it was really beautiful and that was a way to make the property attractive for a buyer. I'm encouraged that the house is in the neighborhood of a potential historic district. It is a designated landmark and on the National Register and I'm hoping that other neighbors will see fit to have their houses put on and might become a historic district. I was very pleased that as I was working there in the garden for two years, the neighbors coming over and talking to me and thanking me and saying how wonderful it is to see this being fixed up so to speak *[laughs]*.

Q: Yes.

Shepherd: That was very gratifying. So I feel like if people only understood about preservation and, you know, weren't afraid of it, I think that's one of my main missions is getting people not to be afraid of landmark designation. It's so irrational. But I understand they've been fed a bill of goods. And as I said, when I began here in the 1970s, nobody supported landmark designation.

They just were awful about it until Michael McMahon came along as our city councilman, he was the only person that's ever given any funding to help the Preservation League.

Even now, the borough president has done this water—all this waterfront work, which is fabulous. And he's restoring the Victory Diner, which is a classic American diner on Victory Boulevard, but they moved it to the waterfront *[laughs]*. But I was really delighted that that building is going to be preserved and made into a facility for eating—a café.

But my mission I think *[unclear]* anything else is to try to help people to see the value of historic preservation, how it enriches their lives, and how it enriches—not just because we enjoy this beautiful environment, these beautiful artifacts, but in the study of history it helps us to understand people and how they lived and how we can be more responsive to other people. It broadens our horizons as individuals not just in a historical way but also in a personal way. That you can stand in the shoes of other people in times past as well as becoming more sensitive to people in your present environment. Preservation has many virtues, which I hope—only hope that people can discover and appreciate their life more fully—

Q: Yes.

Shepherd: —through preservation.

I started my career as a minister in a church and—*[coughs]* excuse me—and I am very active now in my local Episcopal Church, the Christ Church New Brighton. In my work at Richmond

Town as the director, I feel like it's a continuation of my ministry. It's really not that different, because the ministry involves working with people and accepting people and understanding people and helping people, to educate people—it's all the same thing. The values are, in many ways, identical. I find that I was very happy that I was able to make this transition in my professional career in a way that really has enriched my life and I think helped my community, too.

Q: That's great.

Shepherd: That's the end *[laughter]*.

Q: How has the preservation movement in Staten Island evolved or changed over time?

Shepherd: Well—

Q: You've—we've talked about this a bit, but—

Shepherd: —I covered that pretty good.

Q: Yes.

Shepherd: The main thing to say—if you want to get that in there—is about the increased over-development and how preservation then can work as a tool to slow down over-development. I

think that's how it's changed, really. It's still very small. The support for preservation here is very small.

Q: And what do you feel is your greatest contribution to the movement?

Shepherd: Just what I was saying I think. Don't you think that answers the question, what I was just saying?

Q: Yes.

Shepherd: My greatest contribution? Well, I think probably my publications—

Q: Right.

Shepherd: —will live on after I'm gone and I feel wonderful about that. I think they're really good and I'm proud of what I have left in writing, what's available. Because everywhere I go it's wonderful that people know who I am and recognize what I've done and they want to help me. That's just really a wonderful thing to live here. I'm so happy that this has been my life in this community. In spite of all the discouragement here about preservation, it brings together wonderful people, you know, and I know all these people. We're a small community within a community. And getting them together I guess would be one of my contributions by creating The Preservation League. But I think probably my publications and my work of restoring individual properties at Historic Richmond Town and other places will be my contribution.

Q: Yes. Staten Island is undeniably the most suburban of the New York City boroughs. Do you feel that the preservation movement in Staten Island is different from preservation in other boroughs? Do you think that there are different preservation challenges in Staten Island than in other boroughs?

Shepherd: I think that we're quite similar to Queens. I don't really know this in a detailed way but Queens has developed and Staten Island is becoming more like Queens all the time and I'm sure there must be an uphill battle there, too, to work. The value of land is so tremendous here that it overshadows the value of preservation. That's why we lose these buildings.

I think Staten Island, because it is an island, is an isolated place and ideas of a contemporary nature, or slower, to get here, if we weren't an island. Not that we're really isolated but we are isolated in a manner. Right from the beginning, we were always connected to Manhattan through our trade routes. Everyone that lived here, as a farmer and a seaman, all dealt with people in Manhattan. We knew what was going on in the world but we liked being out here in this quiet isolated place and away from the latest trends about everything. When we began—started becoming a suburban community in 1835 with New Brighton, the old timers out on the other parts of the island called us those foreigners that plastered themselves against the hill of New Brighton. They didn't want to have anything to do with those Wall Street-types that came over here to live because of the beautiful scenery and the fresh air and everything.

In a way, we're still like that. People come here to escape. They want their children to be safe, they want them to go to the best school—a public school, preferably, or a Catholic school—they want to have a yard around their house, and they're just not terribly interested in their community and its future. That's the nature of a suburb I think.

But added—what makes it so great to live here is that you are in proximity to the world's greatest city. So if you want to be up-to-date and in the city, you have the best of both worlds. That's what great about Staten Island. And we still have these open spaces. You know, we have more parks than anybody and they're just wonderful. The people that have supported the greenbelt and development of parks on Staten Island have been very strong advocates, very effective, and this makes our borough really a wonderful place, the parks.

Q: On that topic, can you talk about the intersection between preservation and conservation?

Shepherd: Yes. Yes, that's really a good one. We haven't—we are connected but we haven't really engaged each other here on the island very much. They were ahead of us chronologically working and very effective getting their forces together. Many of the same—they're the same people in many cases. But when push comes to shove, the natural areas are more important than the built areas to those—to the naturalists I think. They didn't—for example, they couldn't support the Richmond Town Loop. They felt like that—so many of their supporters were on the opposite side. It was terrible, terrible, terrible.

But I have only praise for the naturalists and the people who have preserved our parks—created our parks, and preserved our natural areas. It's really—and with the future of the landfill area as a park, the largest park in the city, you know, it's really wonderful. And we still have our views, our views of the waterfront and our hillside. The views are just wonderful and they're now being opened up and being more appreciated all the time. I hope this book I'm writing on will also add to that appreciation.

Now what—that question, did I answer it?

Q: Yes, absolutely.

Shepherd: Okay.

Q: And can you talk about Spanish Camp?

Shepherd: Spanish Camp, I don't really know much about that—

Q: Okay.

Shepherd: —except it's a shame and I was not involved in trying to save it. I do know that in my Tottenville book research I found why Dorothy Day came to Staten Island. When she was not—she didn't live at Spanish Camp first, she lived at another beachfront area, and she was baptized

in the Tottenville Church. When she had her child, her daughter, she wanted her daughter to be baptized and that's why she came to the church, then she also was baptized herself.

I think Staten Island is a funny place because she was a Roman Catholic and the Catholic Church has praised her work. But at the same time, she was really a rebel in her lifestyle and in so many other ways that is not praised by people—typical suburban types. It's really interesting to see this interaction of two cultures, the church and the society. But I was not involved really in trying to save Spanish Camp. Maybe I should have been but I wasn't.

Q: As you mentioned as well, there are a number of historic downtowns in Staten Island from Port Richmond to Eltingville to Clifton. What is the future of these downtowns and how can preservation play a role in their revitalization?

Shepherd: Oh, it's not an area that I'm really focused on. I've just been more of a generalist. But there are people that are focusing on them. As I say, this—one of the new developments—yes, I didn't think of this earlier—is that the colleges now are being much more concerned with their relationship to the community. When I first started here, there was no connection whatsoever. You could go to the faculty out there and they didn't know beans or never talked about it, anyway, or never told their students about anything. Now there is this push in higher education that students get involved in the community.

Have you felt that in a general way in the world of—?

Q: Absolutely. Yes.

Shepherd: Yes. So at Wagner College, they focused on Port Richmond all last year in various different departments of the university with sending their students to work in those areas like nursing and preservation—all different features. Now the College of Staten Island also is getting on board. And like I said, Columbia, they've asked me to help them with Port Richmond. So, this is something that would be very good I think for their type of interest revitalization, because very often the university approaches preservation through planning I think.

Q: Yes.

Shepherd: Planning is a bigger issue. That's probably the answer what I should give you for your question because it's only through planning that a commercial area can be revitalized. Just one shopkeeper has a terrible time trying to—and we've not succeeded very well at all. It's still a struggle but it's still percolating shall we say. Port Richmond is now our largest concentration of Mexican Americans and the shopping area is vital, I mean vital. You go there and there are people on the street all the time. But it's an entirely different clientele than it was in the late Nineteenth, early Twentieth Century when it was the premier shopping area.

When the mall opened in 1962 that drained—now everyone shops at the mall. And even before that, the Forest Avenue shopping center took—in Port Richmond took away just like every other community in America, that shopping center took away the main street clientele. It's not area that I can really speak with much wisdom. I'm getting tired, Elin.

Q: Okay.

Shepherd: So are we almost done?

Q: Yes. One more question?

Shepherd: Okay.

Q: Interpretation is the best word in preservation today.

Shepherd: What is it?

Q: Interpretation.

Shepherd: Right. Right.

Q: How do we tell the story of a place, etc. You've worked as an interpreter, author, curator.

Shepherd: Yes. Yes.

Q: And there are multiple levels in which you can interpret Staten Island's history. Can you talk about what you see as some of the key preservation stories and the key histories that should be told?

Shepherd: Well, I think in interpretation, like any educational program, you should begin where the people already know something so that it becomes personal. In teaching, I always start trying to know who those people are that I am teaching and get them to talk. I always ask them what do they know about—what are the main events in our island's history, for example. And they always say the opening of the Verrazano Bridge in 1964. I always try to start with something that is of relevance to them.

Therefore, we should also emphasize recent history in preservation. People love to talk about when they were growing up, you know, when they—our people, people of our generation. So I think that's one of the key things about interpretation is trying to start—have your starting point be where your students and your audience understand something already. One of the main problems at Historic Richmond Town, for example, is people felt that was for somebody else. They would be uncomfortable because they wouldn't know enough about history. They would be awkward. Have you ever been to a museum where you feel like you couldn't dare ask a question because that person was talking in such highfalutin terms?

Q: Sure.

Shepherd: You wouldn't feel comfortable there. Well, that—they saw people, average people, saw Richmond Town as something for somebody else. You know teacup kind of people, or people who would wear those costumes, you know, that's pretty far out *[laughs]*. They didn't think of that as something they—a few people of course are always like that. But the main thing I think is making it accessible to an average person without lowering your standards. To make it fun and interesting but not—I don't approve of this emphasis on ghost stories and stuff like that. I think it's so corny but people seem to really like that sort of thing. That's an example I think of going astray. But, you have to try to meet people where they are to begin your process of interpretation.

Q: Right. Well, thank you very much.

Shepherd: Is that a good enough answer?

Q: Absolutely. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]