INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Mary Habstritt

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Mary Habstritt conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on June 26, 2020. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive's Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Before transitioning to her work in industrial and waterfront preservation, Mary Habstritt spent the early part of her life in Minnesota, where she worked as an academic librarian. She holds degrees in Library Science from her undergraduate training at what is now St. Catherine University and her graduate work at Columbia University, and credits this early work as foundational to her passion for research and history.

After initially moving to New York City in the 1980s, Habstritt became involved in the Society of Industrial Archeology (SIA), eventually serving locally on the Board of Directors for the Roebling Chapter of New York and New Jersey in the late 1990s, and later volunteering as an events coordinator for local and national conferences.

She has been a strong advocate for the preservation of industrial building sites throughout New York City, and notes in this interview her involvement in the efforts around the Sheffield Farm Dairy in Manhattanville, and both the Domino Sugar Factory and the Austin, Nichols and Company Warehouse in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Since 2010 Habstritt has steered the Lilac Preservation Project as its Museum Director, working towards the rehabilitation of the retired Coast Guard steamship, *Lilac*. Her work is heavily driven by the formation of partnerships and coalitions, such as the founding of the Historic Ships Coalition. In this interview, Habstritt reflects on the most recent challenges of operating the Lilac Preservation Project's virtual programming during the social distancing requirements of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the continued importance of situating industrial heritage within the broader networks of transportation and social system.

Interviewee: Mary Habstritt | Session: 1

Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic | Location: Remote Video Call

Transcription: Matthew Geesey | Date: June 26, 2020

Q: All right, today is June 26, 2020 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Mary Habstritt for the New York Preservation Archive Project and we're doing this interview remotely because we're in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. And can you start by just saying your name and giving yourself a brief instruction?

Habstritt: Sure. I'm Mary Habstritt and I'm currently working as the museum director at the Lilac Preservation Project and restoring a retired Coast Guard steamship. I've been doing that for about ten years but I was very active in advocating for preservation of industrial sites because of my relationship with the Society for Industrial Archeology [SIA] and that all came after my being an academic librarian for many years.

Q: So I want to actually ask you about all of those things but I want to start at the place where you grew up. So can you tell me a little bit about where that was and the people you grew up with?

Habstritt: Well, I grew up in Minnesota and my family goes back in Minnesota for several generations. My grandfather's—my paternal grandfather ran the family farm until my dad was in high school and then they moved into St. Cloud, Minnesota, which is a regional center for an agricultural area. He went to high school there where he met my mom, and I was born in St.

Cloud. We moved around quite a bit within Minnesota when I was growing up. I went to seven different schools, which I think made me pretty adaptable. So that's an important piece of my history from that perspective. On my mom's side, they had been in St. Cloud for much longer. Like I said, my parents met in high school.

I graduated from a really small Catholic high school, fifty-six in my graduating class. I went to college in St. Paul. So I moved into the Twin Cities proper for the first time. I went to what's now St. Catherine University. It's a Catholic women's school. I got a bachelor's degree in library science and humanities with a minor in classical studies. So I guess I had an appreciation for history that kind of woke up in college. But I always wanted to be a teacher or a librarian.

After college, originally, I couldn't get a job in a school or a library. It was during the [President Ronald] Reagan administration. There had been major cuts to educational budgets. I did an internship at a library at the University of Minnesota where they met every week trying to figure out where they would cut more from the budget because it was just very desperate. There were not a lot of jobs. I spent three months unemployed and then got a secretarial job in a property management company.

After three years there, they wanted to promote me and I just felt that I had spent years learning to be a librarian and that's what I should do. I got a job at the James J. Hill Reference Library and after being there for several years, got as far as I could go without getting a master's degree, and I made the big leap where I quit my job and moved to New York to go to Columbia University.

Again, an appreciation of history worked into that because Columbia had the oldest library school in the country, started by Melvil Dewey of the Dewey Decimal System and I thought that was really cool. Since there wasn't a library school anymore in Minnesota, I had to go somewhere else. One of the pieces of advice I got was go someplace I'd want to live. I didn't think I'd want to live in New York! But I thought it would be pretty exciting for awhile. [Laughs]

After library school, I worked in New York for a year and then I did go back to Minnesota. I had a boyfriend back there. I worked at the University of Minnesota Libraries for seven years and then I ended up marrying a New Yorker. So I came back and fortunately, did not have to work for a living. That actually let me explore my interests in industrial archaeology and that had been sparked when I went to grad school. The boyfriend I mentioned had been quite active in the Society for Industrial Archeology. And I'm in New York. I don't know anybody. I have no friends. My living arrangement at school was not very good. I was really unhappy. So he said, "Come to a conference of the SIA. I'll introduce you to the New York members. They have a really big local chapter there. Very active. They're busy going on tours and stuff. You'll have people you know who you can do things with."

I just became fascinated by getting the behind-the-scenes look at how things are made, all the things we use every day. I think it was something we had become very disconnected to. We don't know people who work in factories anymore. It used to be families were filled with people who made things. That got me interested in industrial archaeology and then, when I had the

opportunity, I decided to devote my time to helping preserve some of the sites that were important to that history.

Q: I want to ask about how you came to decide you wanted to be a teacher or a librarian, especially in light of like you said, going to so many different schools when you were young. What was your relationship like with the teachers and librarians that you encountered?

Habstritt: Well, I was extremely shy, so I did not make friends easily. So I think I did look to the teachers and librarians to help me out in navigating things. I actually one summer was sent to an experimental summer school by my mom and it was meant to be very nontraditional where you could move around between classrooms and work stations where things were going on and just jump in and try something new. For someone who is really shy, this was a nightmare. So I went to the library as a refuge and the librarian decided to put me to work and I read stories to the younger kids. Another teacher there got me interested in writing a story of my own and I think that particular experience is really key because I was very uncomfortable and they gave me a place to go and things to do that fit my interests and made me feel useful.

Q: I was also a shy child. I can relate. And then I want to ask about just some details about the library science program. I went to Columbia as an undergrad and a graduate student and through that time, I worked in the libraries and had a brief stint between the two working at Avery Library. So I was always curious because by the time I was there, the library science program was no longer active. So what was it like there as a student, having all those resources of the Columbia Libraries at your disposal?

Habstritt: Well, one thing you just made me think of—it's not directly related to your question but—it was kind of unusual to have an undergraduate degree in library science. My college was somewhat unique in that but, at the time in Minnesota, the University of Minnesota's master's program had lost its accreditation or was losing it while I was in college. We were warned not to go there and then it did close. Locally, the bachelor's degree from St. Catherine's was looked upon as good or better than the master's degree from the University of Minnesota. So up to a certain point, there were jobs available for people with that degree that normally would not be very marketable.

But what I was thinking about that your question triggered in a way in the back of my mind was when I was at St Catherine's, they were making budget cuts and one of the programs that was threatened was classics, and another one that was threatened was library science. So I was going to faculty meetings—students were not typically allowed—and was handing out fliers and was trying to save the programs that were important to me.

When I was at Columbia, just as I entered, they had expanded the program from a one-year program to a two-year program as an attempt to save it. I was in the last one-year class. They were trying to make it more academically rigorous because, as an Ivy League university, they weren't terribly comfortable with a professional degree program, especially one that didn't bring in a lot of money, unlike the business program. Surprisingly, the librarians on staff, in Butler Library anyway, were not supportive of retaining the library program because they wanted the space. The library school occupied a whole floor in Butler Library—

Q: Which floor?

Habstritt: The sixth floor. It had its own specialized library collection and classrooms and offices up there. It's interesting politically from the aspect of what's important to people. To me, saving the oldest library program in the country and keeping it at the only university in the Ivy League that had a library program would have been a lot more important than space. But that's what it came down to. Maybe that actually is part of what at least contributed to my becoming an advocate later. I just never had thought of that before.

Q: And when you first—you mentioned attending an SIA meeting for the first time and learning that history. Do you remember some of the histories that were being shared? Specific buildings or sites, locations of where things used to be that you were learning about and just that experience of moving through the city and knowing that history? Do you remember some specifics of that?

Habstritt: Well, the conference I mentioned that introduced me to the Society for Industrial Archeology was in Quebec. It's a national organization but there's always been an overlap to Canada and there's been very active members from Canada. So the first conference I went to happened to be in Quebec.

One of the sites I remember in particular was Chicoutimi [Pulp Mill]. It's a former paper mill that's far up in the North Woods. It was a very long drive from Quebec actually and it's a site

that's in ruins. So it's a true archaeological site as well.

One of the things that's unique about industrial archaeology is that lots of times the sites are still standing, which doesn't mean that there hasn't been a loss of information about what was done there. There is still a lot of reading of the interior landscape of the building to understand the processes and what went on there. But lots of times, the sites are above ground which is different than classical archaeology.

So that's a site that I particularly remember from that conference. But I also find the still active sites are extremely educational because it lets you learn those processes so you can read the abandoned sites later. So you really need to see both.

I did get introduced to the Roebling Chapter, which is the chapter that represents New York and New Jersey. It then had over five hundred members, so a huge chapter. Gerry Weinstein was the president at the time. So I got introduced to him and he later became my husband.

Q: I need ten seconds to go turn on my power strip. I just noticed that my backup recorder is running on battery. [Pause] Okay, there we go. Moving along. I'm sorry about that interruption.

Habstritt: A technical issue that must be addressed.

Q: [Laughs] Yet another device that was out of the frame and I was interacting with. So I'm curious to hear about how the Society for Industrial Archeology was active and took action.

What was being discussed at the time you were becoming involved or attending, which would have been—is this the early ‘90s?

Habstritt: I think it was 1989, the first one I went to.

Q: Can you kind of set the scene of that at the time?

Habstritt: Well, I later became their events coordinator and actually organized and ran the conferences. So I’m actually pretty intimately involved with the standard schedule. They usually held them in the spring to accommodate the field season for those archaeologists that actually do work in the field. And I should back up and say the Society for Industrial Archeology—I think partly because the field is very small and originally, when it began, there weren’t any academic programs devoted to it—they’ve always been very welcoming to amateurs. And many of the amateurs are extremely knowledgeable often about a particular industry or particular aspect of engineering, like bridges or railways.

One of the great things about going on the tours is not just what you see but also that you get to talk to these people. There’s always someone in the crowd who’s an expert on what you’re looking at and you could be standing next to a curator from the Smithsonian, who specializes in engineering, who will hold forth about the equipment that you’re looking at while the tour guide continues on without you.

So there’s a fair amount of informal education that happens as well. The other thing is we’re

going into factories that typically don't do tours, and the SIA negotiates the fact that they're particularly interested in studying industrial processes and often get into places that are not open to the public. So they don't have canned tours. We get to talk to the people who actually work on the factory floor and learn about what their job is like.

So I think that all feeds into it. It's not just that you're learning about industrial history. You're really getting the nitty gritty, what's it like to work in these places and how they make the things that they make. So their conferences are usually in the spring and run from Thursday to Sunday with an opening night reception and a speaker to set the stage for the place that you are because each year, it's in a completely different city. And then a whole day of tours of factories by bus and then the annual business meeting of the Society, and a closing banquet, and some sort of after-conference tours, walking tours of the local architecture and the like.

So they really try to give you a feel of the place that you're in as well. I enjoyed it enough that, in 2000, I found out that they had been negotiating to have a conference in Duluth and I was living in New York at that point but had been part of a conversation years before trying to organize a conference in Duluth, and we didn't have enough boots on the ground within the city itself. I found out they had been negotiating and then negotiations had fallen apart. The person who had agreed to host the event at the local historical society had been fired. His boss didn't know that the organization had been committed to co-hosting the conference. It was all going to shit. And I said, "What can I do?" So I ran my first conference as a volunteer remotely from another city. We hired a former hotel manager on the ground there to handle the things that had to be handled on the ground. I learned a lot from her.

Then a few years later, I stepped in again. They'd been—on the short list, they had Brooklyn as a site, and then the person who had volunteered to run the conference in Brooklyn got transferred to a job in Florida, and so they dropped it off the list. I was on the board of the SIA at the time and I said, "What happened in Brooklyn? It was on the last list. It's not on the list anymore. We're desperate for a place for the next conference." I said, "It's where you've got the biggest chapter in the country. I think we can put this together." So I jumped in again as a volunteer and ran another conference. Then I got asked to work as their events coordinator part-time and ran several events. They also do a fall tour. That's a little smaller event in a small city.

So yes, I guess I tend to leap into the breach.

Q: Do you recall what sites—sorry, there's an echo—what sites you went to when the Brooklyn conference happened, what sort of factory tours? You said this was in 2000?

Habstritt: No, Duluth was in 2000. Brooklyn was 2002.

Q: Okay.

Habstritt: We were slightly handicapped by being in the midst of planning when 9/11 happened and it affected people on our committee emotionally, really dramatically, needless to say. But we carried it off and one of the key sites we went to was the Domino Sugar Refinery, which was still operating at the time. We went to a number of small factories. One group went to East New

York, which I think is still pretty gritty but then it was actually kind of scary. It included a lighting company where they made lighting fixtures. A tour that I led went to a coffee roaster. We went to a granite cutting company where they cut granite for monuments and an individual stone carver had a little shop in Middle Village, Queens too, where he was still carving stones by hand. One tour went specifically to military sites, all the different forts around New York City.

So that's all that's coming to me right now. One thing, I think, the Brooklyn one's a particularly good example, but the SIA used to publish a guidebook for each conference to record the history of the sites that were visited, and that got used against me later. We'll probably talk about the Austin, Nichols & Company Warehouse but at the Landmarks Preservation Commission hearings, the attorney for the owner of the building got up and waved the Brooklyn conference guidebook [*East of the River, South of the Sound: 31st Annual Brooklyn Conference*, 2002] over his head and said that even the SIA did not think the warehouse was important enough to be included in its guidebook. And then Chairman [Robert] Tierney called me next and everyone laughed. I was introduced as the President of the Roebling Chapter, I believe, and I pointed out that we only included the places that we had the opportunity to visit, and that it was a volunteer effort so we couldn't cover everything. Then I went on to advocate for preservation of that warehouse, which fortunately has survived.

Q: Well, I wanted to ask about how preservation and the specific modes through which preservation happens in New York City became something that you were involved with.

Habstritt: Yes, I think as I got more and more involved with the SIA—as I said, I was a director

on the board before I became their events coordinator—I watched things moving through the board for consideration and it didn't happen very often but now and again, a member would ask for the SIA's support for preservation and advocacy efforts. They didn't have a process for that really, except for a petition to be made at the annual meeting and that's only once a year. What about when something comes up in between? There was also a concern about vetting such requests. Does it really rise to the level of significance that the SIA should be speaking up about this item? I had watched a controversy like that play out with the board. I felt like although preservation had always been stated to be part of their mission, not much was being done. In working on setting up all these tours, and helping to write and edit the guidebooks to preserve the stories of these places, and then watching them often disappear right after we'd seen them, I saw their value.

When I had the chance, I thought I would like to do more. What happened really though was, although my mind was in that place, I didn't know where to start. But people came to me. The first one, I think, was the graving dock in Red Hook. I was contacted by David Sharps, who runs a floating museum in Red Hook, asking for help. We put together a coalition—we were not successful—it's buried under IKEA's parking lot. But the next one I got contacted about was the Austin, Nichols & Co. warehouse by a tenant. It had already been made residential sometime before but the owner wanted to improve the revenue he was getting from the building and put an addition on top. She felt it was wrong-headed and was looking for help, and somehow found me.

So I got started by people coming to me but it was a sort of meshing of interests. I wanted to do more and then I got presented with the opportunities to do more. I think because of my

experience with writing histories about places we visited, I understood the stories were important. I also, in very early efforts like tabling at street festivals and things, I found the citizens I ran into were really interested to know what goes on beyond those walls at Domino Sugar. I think it's a really interesting-looking place but I don't understand what happens there. And I could tell them. So I understood that for other people to value these places, they needed to know the stories. And I'm a librarian. I love to do research. So I felt like that was one of the things I brought to these efforts was putting together facts, establishing the significance, being able to tell the story and help recognize the value.

Those efforts were all coalitions of one sort or another. We worked with the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance on the graving dock and it was a program of the Municipal Art Society [MAS]. We were working with them. On Austin, Nichols & Company, we were working with the Historic Districts Council primarily, although the Municipal Art Society was also involved. At that time, they had just added an endowed preservation specialist to their staff and I think that position was eliminated later. They kind of got out of being really active in preservation but at that point in time, were very helpful and had more resources than a lot of the other organizations involved.

Q: You mentioned the Municipal Art Society. Can you talk about working with them to identify the Brooklyn waterfront as one of the most endangered places?

Habstritt: Yes. So both of those places that I brought up as the first sites that I got involved with were on the Brooklyn waterfront. Because the SIA had toured Domino Sugar, and then after the

national conference, our local chapter went back and toured it again—for local members who might not have gotten a chance—we found out that they were closing soon and that they had sold the site. Domino Sugar had been carved out of the large Williamsburg and Greenpoint rezoning, which I think the Municipal Art Society may have been the first preservation group that recognized that as a threat and actively went to try to document all the sites that they could. Then growing out of all these separate endeavors about individual sites, they masterminded the idea of putting the whole Brooklyn Industrial Waterfront on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 11 Most Endangered [Historic Places] list.

I helped do the research for that. I actually got hired by the Municipal Art Society to put together little bios of every site we could identify as potentially significant along the Brooklyn waterfront. I was doing all of this through MAS, which was taking the lead and working with the National Trust. Lisa Kersavage was the staff person who was the preservation fellow there and she said the Trust was having a really hard time wrapping its head about the concept of saving industrial buildings. I think that is a struggle generally. When they become no longer used, they're a kind of building that often doesn't look attractive. It's big, it's empty, it attracts vandalism. They're considered blighted. It's not as easy to make a case for them as an architecturally beautiful house or apartment building where you have a named architect. Architectural historians and architects, who often people the commissions that improve these things can't immediately understand it. If you can identify the style and the famous architect and it's a much easier sell.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission in New York City in particular hasn't been very good about considering social history, whether that's LGBTQ sites or Underground Railroad sites. It's

much easier for them if they can just look at it, see it's beautiful, be able to say who the architect was. That's easy. Or the famous person who slept there. I think we've got several buildings in the city with plaques on that said Edgar Allen Poe once slept there. As a drug addict, he got around a lot.

Q: Yes, that's very different than industrial preservation.

Habstritt: But a lot of the buildings actually are beautiful. I think it's easy to see that with the Domino Sugar Refinery. But as a comparative example, I tried to get Christopher Gray, who used to write a column on historic buildings for the *New York Times*, "Streetscapes"—I tried to get him interested in doing a column on the Trade Facilities Building, which is now known as One Brooklyn Bridge Park. It's really interesting because it was designed by one of the two architects who also designed the Starrett-Lehigh Building in Manhattan, a very famous warehouse, very striking, curved corners, photographed by—I'm going to go blank, the famous photographer of the Depression era [Berenice Abbott].

He actually worked out some of the ideas that he used in the Starrett-Lehigh Building by doing them first in the Trade Facilities Building. One was the idea of the vertical street, having an elevator that was big enough for a truck to roll into and take its entire load from one floor to another. Another concept was having individual floors or parts of floors available to individual manufacturers and giving them the facilities of a big factory when they weren't quite big enough to afford that yet themselves, and have access to the water and rail facilities.

One thing I'll say about that is part of why the industrial buildings are on the waterfront—why the waterfront was important—was it provided transportation. You have to get the raw materials into the factory and the finished goods out. The transportation network is key to that. They usually had redundancy, so you'd have both water access and rail access. The rails often ran along the waterfronts because they're more level. You want nice flat grades for railroads to be efficient. If there's a strike on the railroad, they can depend on the boats. If the weather keeps the boats from reaching them, they can depend on the railroads. So you'll see, power plants and factories concentrated along the water because they could get coal, for instance, at the power plants in, take the ashes out after by boat. They could use the trains as backup if the water transports failed, really important. It was actually key to figuring out some things in Manhattanville when I got involved up there.

Q: Do you want to talk about that next?

Habstritt: This is some years later and I'd have to look up what year it was but I think it was about 2008. I was contacted by Anne Whitman, who owned a former dairy stable in Manhattanville. We actually toured it on a Roebling Chapter tour of the neighborhood at one time, so that's how she knew about me and the SIA. Columbia University was planning to rezone twenty-five acres in the neighborhood. Her building was on the National Register and she wanted to save it and actually proposed creating an industrial heritage district. So I called my contacts at the state historic preservation office, the Historic Districts Council to get the lay of the politics and where things were at because the ULURP had already started—that's the city Uniform Land Use Review Process that is a very—what's the word I want to use? I want to say

rigorous but it's not really rigorous in some sense. But it very strictly adheres to a time table. So you can't fiddle around. It's on a clock once it starts.

I found out that it was underway already. Columbia had filed for it. One thing about that process is developers have usually worked with planners and the city planning department for a long time before it ever gets to the public review part of it. So they've already worked out a lot of things where the city's happy with it, and although there are several levels of public input during that rigorous ULURP process, it's pretty much decided and you're just going to tweak a few things. So one thing I was doing was figuring out where could I actually effect change because I knew we couldn't stop this. For one thing, it's Columbia University, right? But I thought we could save her [Whitman's] building, so I focused on that.

There wasn't time to try to convince any powers that be that there was a whole industrial heritage district here although there probably was. I started from a report that Anne gave me that had been done by students in the preservation school, ironically, at Columbia. And that class had, ironically, included Lisa Kersavage who was the preservation fellow at MAS. Whether she would admit to it now or not, I don't know, but she said she felt used at the time, that the students had been, unknown to them, helping Columbia plan to move into this neighborhood by doing this studio project to look at what might be historically significant.

When I read the report—and this is going back to the idea of the transportation networks being critical—the students had guessed that the reason there were so many dairies in the neighborhood, and also so many ice companies, was that the ice companies were supplying the

dairies with ice, so the dairies had located there to be near the ice companies. I knew, for one thing, that there was a big milk trainyard around 59th Street. The New York Central, which was the only freight railroad into Manhattan, had a big processing center specifically for milk trains. I had seen a presentation about milk trains and how critical it was to keep the milk cool and move it quickly.

I also knew that ice for New York City was typically harvested from ice ponds on farms up the Hudson River, packed in sawdust, and moved by boat into the city, or by rail line. There were ice houses along the rail lines. But I knew that both of those were getting moved into the city. So the dairy companies were not near the ice companies to have access to the ice because the ice could have been brought in anywhere there was a dock or a rail line, and the rail line ran all the way down the West Side. So I concentrated on the rail line, knowing that milk was transported by train. There was this sort of blank spot on the old Sanborn [Map Company] insurance maps. So I called up my friend, the expert on the local railway systems—because these are the kind of people you get to know in the SIA—I call up my friend who is the expert on New York City marine railway system. I said, "Was there a railyard around 125th Street?" He said, "Oh, yes, the 135th Street Railyard." Okay, bingo!

The High Line, which a lot of us know now, was originally part of the West Side Freight Line. New York Central brought freight into New York City by train. It was part of what was called the West Side Improvement [Project]. It was a huge project under Robert Moses to improve rail transportation down the West Side. As part of that, they built a small yard in Manhattanville for unloading milk, specifically, and auto parts. Cars were becoming very popular. A lot of the

garages where people stored their cars and a lot of the early rental car companies settled there because it was easy access to all the local highways too. It's why Anne Whitman was running a moving company out of this old dairy stable. Her trucks could get access to anywhere in the city in minutes because of the access to the main roadways. So it was still important at the time this was all going on.

I actually found a schedule of when the milk trains stopped in Manhattanville at the New York Public Library. So I was able to create a whole picture of the importance of the dairy industry to the neighborhood. Why it was there in the first place was because of, again, transportation. When the IRT reached 125th Street, it spurred residential development in that area, which meant a market for milk. They had stables for the milk wagons, all drawn by horses then, pasteurization plants. There's a big one right on 125th Street that was a Sheffield Farms pasteurization plant, long ago owned by Columbia. I think that's why they were interested in that neighborhood. They already owned a building there, and it had been used as an experimental engineering plant on one end, and had been turned into an art school [Columbia School of the Arts] in part. I think that was really why they were looking at that neighborhood and its almost adjacency to their Morningside Heights campus.

Q: Well, thinking about Columbia University, where Manhattanville is, on one hand and the Austin, Nichols & Company Warehouse on the other, these are two examples that I'm familiar with. or I have at least witnessed changes [in their vicinity] over the decades. What do you think that preservation's role is in the processes of gentrification?

Habstritt: One thing that's interesting is—I don't have a source to cite or anything like that—but decades ago, when I first heard the word gentrification, it wasn't treated like a bad thing because it was revitalizing neighborhoods. It's become a bad thing because of big developers moving in to neighborhoods that they can exploit. I think when it was more of a grassroots thing—I think that's the difference—where individual people were going into neighborhoods and buying a broken down old house and fixing it up. As that happened more and more in a neighborhood, it made the neighborhood safer and increased values for everyone. So I think the main difference now is, at least in cities like New York, when you talk about gentrification, it's often a big developer coming in, not listening to what the neighborhood needs or wants, and kind of mowing it down. I'm overdramatizing it a bit because that is not always how it happens but I think that's the main contrast.

Since we've talked about Austin, Nichols & Company, that is an interesting example for several reasons. From the gentrification aspect, it was already a residential building when this tenant came to us and said they're talking about destroying this building by adding onto it. The renderings made it look like a big cruise ship. In that case, it was designed by a famous architect, Cass Gilbert, which made it much more sellable as something to be preserved. They weren't talking about demolishing it. They were just talking about modifying it in a way that was not sensitive to the original architecture, and all to make more money.

The developer—and I think this is often heard—is that the owner or developer will say that they can't make enough money from the building the way it is. Now, what's "enough?" They'd already turned it into a residential building, which I'm sure was giving them more income than

when it was still an industrial building. But they wanted more. Because it's a very deep building, they wanted to put in a central courtyard, which meant they'd lose apartments, so they needed to add to the top. But it was all about "making enough."

In the end, that owner who we were fighting in trying to get the building landmarked, he needed a financial partner to make happen what he wanted to happen. I should also say, we were originally fighting him through the Board of Standards and Appeals. He was asking for an exception to his zoning because of not being able to make enough income, and had not proved it with the numbers, and then he dropped the whole case because the area got rezoned anyway and he was able to expand under the rezoned status. But then when push came to shove, he needed a financial partner and that financial partner saw that we had gotten it determined eligible for the National Register and recognized that preservation tax credits would be available. They applied for the tax credits, which meant the National Parks Service would regulate the modifications they made. Much more sympathetic. Not very visible from the street. They did put an addition on but it was more in accord with the original architecture, and under the guidance of preservationists who knew what they were doing.

Then it did get converted to luxury condos from humble rentals. So in the context of gentrification, certainly people were pushed out, and it was not affordable for people who had been in the neighborhood before it happened.

Q: It's a really interesting kind of cultural epicenter. I know people who have gotten evicted from it each time that it changed over the years. To look at it now and the way it kind of uses its

history, to sell this luxury living experience, is really complex.

Habstritt: Now, waterfront views are important. When our waterways were mainly industrial, you didn't really want to go near the water because, for one thing, it was being used for waste from the factory processes. I can remember when Williamsburg-Greenpoint got rezoned and Amanda Burden, who was the commissioner of City Planning at the time, talked about walking around the waterfront, and you couldn't get near the water because it was all fenced off. Well, before that, you didn't really want to go near the water. It was very polluted. It wasn't a pretty view. It smelled, and not just from industrial waste. The city was dumping its sewer into the waterways and still does when it rains. It's just not as much, not as often.

Q: Yes, I'm wondering if you can think back in this, let's say, long history of development of the waterfront—in Greenpoint and Williamsburg in particular but maybe the whole way down to the Brooklyn Bridge—just what was that like to know the relationship that people had with the waterfront in the '80s and '90s and prior to that, and see the waterfront—the way it was thought of—change so dramatically?

Habstritt: Yes, actually maybe contrasting Red Hook to Williamsburg would be interesting to answer some of that. When we tried to save the graving dock in Red Hook, the shipyard that it was part of had already closed. Some of the site was being used by smaller ship suppliers, and the dry dock was still being used on a rental basis by a company that was still repairing ships there. But the shipyard had a wall of buildings along the street that closed people off from the water. Since it was not being fully used anymore and it's a neighborhood that has been poor for

decades. I believe the Red Hook Houses opened in the [Great] Depression as one of the first housing projects in the country.

The people who lived in the neighborhood were no longer connected to the site by working there. The few businesses that were occupying the yard were bringing people from elsewhere, and it wasn't a lot of people. So when IKEA proposed building their store there on the site—and it was one of the biggest pieces of real estate left in the city as a single parcel, so of strong interest to big box stores—people in the neighborhood were looking at the value of the jobs versus what they perceived as an abandoned site, although it wasn't completely abandoned. They were closed off from it. They weren't connected to it anymore. The jobs were what was important. They needed jobs.

They were not strongly supportive of people from outside the neighborhood coming in and saying that it ought to be preserved. They did look at us as outsiders, even though I had been invited by someone who was well-known in the neighborhood and had long been there. The Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance was very small then and didn't have a strong identity, even though someone had gone to most of the early community meetings. When the Municipal Art Society showed up, even though they were really one organization, they weren't perceived as one organization. Like why are you suddenly showing up and trying to tell us what to do? It's our neighborhood. I think that was good for me as a first experience to understand that you couldn't just come in like that as an outsider.

In Williamsburg, again, I was invited by someone in the neighborhood but I worked really hard

at getting to know the other people in the neighborhood who were trying to save their neighborhood. People were still very connected because the biggest site, Domino Sugar [Refinery], which was once the world's largest sugar refinery, a lot of the people in the neighborhood had worked there until it closed. They still had memories of it. They were connected to it. It had provided them with jobs. They saw it as a valuable place and they could also visualize other ways to use it, which is also a key thing. It's very helpful in preservation efforts, especially with industrial buildings that have been abandoned. Or even like Domino Sugar, where it's been in recent use, people have trouble imagining—when so much manufacturing has left America—how you can possibly reuse a site that was built for manufacturing.

So architectural renderings and ideas from people who can see how it might be reused is really important to helping save those places. But I think that community connection was very different in those two examples, and the feeling of being part of a community effort was very different too.

Q: What are some examples of reuse that you feel are successful, either I guess that would be successful if they were allowed to happen, or if there are any sites along the waterfront in New York City that you feel have been successful?

Habstritt: Well, personally, I would like to see places continue to be used for a purpose similar to what they were built for, probably because I am concerned about the loss of the infrastructure. I think, right now [the first few months of the global COVID-19 pandemic], we're probably

thinking wow, we've become so dependent on China. We can't ship things from there anymore. For a while, their factories were not completely operating at capacity because their people were sick and quarantined, and then our people became sick and quarantined, and how do we get our stuff? Amazon [.com] filled the breach in many ways but their supplies were not always available. I ordered a digital thermometer that took months to arrive [laughs] for instance, undoubtedly because it was made in China. So you could wonder if we have the capacity anymore. I've actually wondered that for a long time because I've been seeing these places disappear.

But as far as saving them and reusing them for something else, I think there are a lot of great examples in New York. One is Westbeth [Artists Housing] in Manhattan, a very early reuse of an industrial building by Richard Meier, I believe, in the 1970s already. It's a former Bell Telephone [Laboratories] factory, and the High Line once passed right through it. When they built the High Line, that was a critical portion because Bell Laboratories needed to not be affected by the vibrations of the trains passing through. So there was some very careful engineering done to make sure that their experiments would not be affected by the vibrations from the trains.

So really interesting, historically, from that perspective. A number of innovations in not just telephony and telegraphs but Bell Labs got into filmmaking, so motion picture technology. Many innovations were made there at that site, and the reuse carved the building up into artist live-work workspaces. So in a sense, there's still some manufacturing happening but on a very individual basis. It gave them low costs—I think a lot of them may be subsidized, low cost

spaces. They could be in that whole New York milieu and create their work and be right in the heart of Manhattan. So I think that's a big winner.

Actually, we've been talking about Austin, Nichols & Co. a lot. The architecture was significant, the construction was significant. Cass Gilbert worked with Turner Construction, which is a huge international company now that started out making concrete stairs for the [New York City] subway system. That was the first job that they got. As their way to stand out from their market, they combined engineering and construction in one firm, which was kind of different at the time. They worked successfully with Cass Gilbert on the Austin, Nichols & Company Warehouse, but also the Brooklyn Army Terminal. Austin, Nichols was the first time that Cass Gilbert had worked in reinforced concrete, and the speed of concrete construction at that site had gotten attention in engineering journals of the time. So it was not only significant because of the architect but also because of how the building was put together.

So we still have that. It's been converted to luxury condos but we still have that and the embodiment of that history helps us to remember those innovations. There's value in keeping the building for a new purpose.

Q: You'd said something in the NYPAP waterfront history conversation that I wanted to ask you about. You just reminded me. You said, "To me, history is neutral and we should preserve the good along with the bad or we forget about the bad too." I wondered if you could just elaborate on that a little bit.

Habstritt: Yes, and I also in the whole recent controversy of pulling down statues of people who we now look upon as bad, I have said things on my Facebook page about how no one should be remembered for the worst thing they ever did. I think any person we look at in history, we'll find both good and bad about. I think that as that quote goes, "anyone who does not know history is doomed to repeat it." I really believe in that, and that's why I don't think we should forget the evil things. I don't think the good things should be eliminated and forgotten because of the bad things either.

But for instance, when we were fighting to get Domino Sugar Refinery landmarked, the local groups that were fighting for affordable housing on the site used the fact that Domino had undoubtedly used slaves on their plantations in Cuba where the sugar was grown and harvested. I didn't think that should be a reason to tear it down. That's how they were portraying it. We should wipe this away because it's bad. There's actually a lot of things that are either bad or questionable about how the Havemeyers and Elder Company operated their business. They actually created a sugar trust and dominated the industry to the point of controlling ninety-eight percent of the sugar consumed in the country, and that was their biggest refinery there in Williamsburg.

I don't think that should be forgotten. It was part of the trustbusting that Theodore Roosevelt did. We're taking his statue down now but he did a lot of things for the citizens of the country in providing good, clean food and breaking up the trusts that controlled pricing on petroleum and sugar and other commodities—really critical to everyone in keeping prices down and allowing fair competition among businesses. The Havemeyers also did wonderful things. They were big

collectors of art. The Impressionist collection at the Metropolitan [Museum of Art] was started mostly from their early collecting of then-unrecognized artists. A lot of the robber barons were also philanthropists. I think especially in industry, you can see good and bad.

Yes, they often exploited people. That's why we had unions for instance. They also did good things with the money they made. There's good and bad. With buildings, whether they're industrial, residential, or commercial, they're embodying the past. They remind us of all of it and we should remember all of it. We should learn from it.

Q: And how do you think that some of those embodiments can propel that action to not repeat the past?

Habstritt: Well, I think whether it's a statue or a building, when you encounter it, it starts a conversation. What is this? What did that person do? What happened behind those walls? In having the conversation and learning about it, you can decide what's valuable to you to learn from going forward in your own life.

Q: Before we move slightly away from the waterfront conversation, I wanted to ask if there were any other sites along the New York City waterfront that you wanted to talk about or that you've been involved with in some way.

Habstritt: Well, I feel like there weren't too many successes, but one success was the Eberhard Faber [Pencil] Factory in Greenpoint. It was also part of that large [Williamsburg/Greenpoint]

rezoning. It was a pencil factory. They started out in buildings that had been built for other manufacturers but united them all by putting a star logo in the gables, so you could tell which buildings were Eberhard Faber buildings. Then one of their newer buildings, which I think is from the 1930s, that they put up themselves, was a reinforced concrete daylight factory building decorated with terra cotta pencils. When the Municipal Art Society and a group we put together, which was originally the Williamsburg Greenpoint Preservation Alliance, we went about trying to document all of these sites before they got developed so we could get a little bit ahead of that process of them being torn down.

One of the Eberhard Faber buildings did get demolished for a hotel and interestingly the same tenant from the Austin, Nichols & Company building that got me involved there, she and her husband ran a business that manufactured store displays in one of the Eberhard Faber buildings. So she put out the call about this, and because we had all the information together, and I had done a lot of research on the company, I put an emergency request into the Landmarks Preservation Commission. I think, partly because there were multiple owners of the different buildings, and for landmarking, the city does not have to get the owner to approve the landmarking—they can do it without the owner's approval—they put it through very quickly. So we got the remaining buildings protected.

One thing that I learned in all this advocacy early on was New York City landmarking is much more rigorous in protecting buildings than the National Register of Historic Places. They can work in concert, as in Austin, Nichols & Company. We had a real struggle trying to get it landmarked and it was very political. It ended up not being landmarked by vetoing a mayoral

approval. But because, in the meantime, we got it determined eligible for the National Register, and so eligible for the tax credits, that saved it. We generally went for landmarking because of the stronger protections, but sometimes it can work better to make use of the National Register listing.

I will say the Landmarks Preservation Commission did not like you using the fact that something was already on the National Register to convince them to landmark something. So they didn't like to be pushed by that. That was another thing that I learned in the process, not to just bludgeon them with the National Register. We had to make the case separately for the city to value the place.

Q: And how have you seen that process change over time? The landmarking process and the commissions over the years?

Habstritt: I was mostly involved with the Preservation Commission under Robert Tierney. I really didn't experience any other chairs. I was working at *Lilac*, the ship that I'm working at now, really by the time a new chair came in. But one thing that I noticed during the [Michael] Bloomberg administration was he was letting a lot of the commissioners sort of hang in limbo when their term of office expired. They're only appointed for a certain period of time, but they're appointed by the mayor. And he was not renewing their appointments, which meant that they could be removed at any time really with no notice. It actually made their voting more political. A lot of them did not want to lose their spot on the commission, so didn't want to speak out if they felt it would get them into political hot water.

I did see that change. I also did see, with individual sites, the chair of the commission sometimes operated more politically. Going back again to Domino Sugar, the usual process when there's a hearing before the Landmarks Commission is that they alternate pro and con speakers. So when you sign in to speak, you'll say whether you're for or against whatever it is that's before them. They might do two for, and two against, but they alternate. Try to keep it fair and even.

One thing that was a surprise with the hearing on Domino Sugar was that some of the neighborhood groups—Churches United [for Fair Housing] was leading it—that were advocating for affordable housing, brought in community members by bus, all wearing matching T-shirts provided by the developer. The bus was paid for by the developer. Because they came in by bus and they had the bus waiting, the chair let all of them speak first, one by one, and there were probably, I don't know, fifty people. So all the people who were against it got to speak first. And then they started calling the people who were for preservation. People like me. The hearing had gone on so long by that point that most of the press had left. Also, we were coming after, say, forty, fifty people who had talked about how not only should the building not be preserved but the history was evil.

Ironically, the portion of the Domino Refinery that was being considered for landmarking was never going to have any of the affordable housing in it. One of the commissioners asked, finally, when all of the testimony was done, would any of the affordable units be going into the landmarked buildings. And the vice president for the developers said, "No way! It would be way too expensive!" It's very expensive to convert these old factory buildings into apartments, no,

no. no. All the affordable housing is going into the vacant parking lot part of the site, where you won't have a water view. He didn't spell it out like that but that was the effect, is the one inland part of the site with no water view was going to be where the affordable housing was.

The developer had really been pushing that they were going to do more affordable housing as a percentage of the project than what the city required them to do. So they were really trying to make themselves look good by providing more than expected. The kind of secret thing was that they were going to push all those into an essentially segregated area that would be the least desirable of all the apartments.

Q: And "affordable" in that scenario too is still going to be very expensive.

Habstritt: Yes. There was a lot of questioning of that from people in the neighborhood who had been in the neighborhood a long time. "Would any of us be able to afford even the affordable stuff?" No.

Q: Well, I want to talk about the *Lilac*. Can you explain how you got involved in that, the preservation of that ship?

Habstritt: Yes. My husband is also an industrial archaeologist and has a special interest in steam technology and an interest in ships. He had been trying to help save a steamship for some time. Had been involved in several non-profit boards—or nascent non-profits that didn't come together because they didn't get the ship they were trying to save—but been involved in several efforts to

save a steamship.

He was recruited really to help underwrite the purchase of the *Lilac* when it went on the market in 2002. Several ship enthusiasts in New York, specifically historic ship enthusiasts, who had already involved in saving vessels like the fireboat, *John J. Harvey*, and the tug, *Pegasus*, which is a 1906 tugboat, had become aware of it going up for sale. So they recruited Gerry Weinstein to underwrite it, and they formed a new non-profit, Lilac Preservation Project, and brought the ship from Virginia up to New York.

They had an executive director that they hired after a little bit. Originally, the board was very active in the preservation and people drifted away to other projects. They hired an executive director, whose main background was in a youth program but he worked on some boats. For various reasons, he didn't work out but I had started to get involved. After the advocacy I had done, I saw a need for helping them out with some of the community and political relations, and was helping with PR [public relations]. When things fell apart and he was terminated, the board was like, "Where will we find someone else to work in this environment? Who would be crazy enough to take a job on an old ship?" I said, well, I'll do it until you find someone else. So I've been there more than ten years now.

I will say that all the things we've talked about leading up to this and the experiences that I've had of course led me to step in. I would not have stepped in if it was a sailing ship. I'm not interested in sail. I'm interested in the Industrial Age. So the fact that this ship still has steam engines that are in extremely good condition and could be made to operate again was of interest

to me in a way that a sailboat would not have been.

I'd been doing preservation advocacy. I'd been working with government agencies and community groups. I'd been an event planner. We needed to create programming on the ship and I'd worked in bureaucracies. I thought I could make an impact. Unlike the industrial buildings and sites I've been trying to save, which we're always—you're not quite jumping in front of the bulldozer where an effort to take it down was already underway and we got involved to try to save it. In this case, no one was trying to do away with the ship. I didn't have to have that fight. Everyone involved wanted to save it. So I thought it would be more enjoyable, more successful. Because a lot of the fights, I lost. That's why I got involved.

I do event planning, I do fundraising. I do education. And I do oral history with our veterans. [Laughs] This is the first time I've been the interviewee on an oral history. I try to preserve the archives of the ship. Collect artifacts and photos from our veterans to document her history, and carry her into the future. We're finally making some good progress on the ship itself.

Q: What were some of the things that you had to learn about? Was this the first time that you were on a ship, for example? What was that process like of learning about not just this history but having to be this space?

Habstritt: The importance of paint. [Laughs] A steel ship in salt water is constantly vulnerable to corrosion, and in addition to that, even though it is a steel ship in most of its fabric, there's a surprising amount of wood on it, including the roofs are made of wood. One of the things that

got away from me was I didn't get up on the roof until the wood was already so spongy I could stick my thumbs through it, even though it had been rebuilt not too long after the ship came to New York. So the importance of paint to protect the wood and the steel, that was one thing.

Some of what I learn is not so much to care for the ship but to interpret it, to make it understandable to other people. I pretty much knew how steam engines worked but not, for instance, how communications within the ship, so that the engine room crew can do their job—how did that work? I still have to sort out the actual signals but we do have one of the telegraphs that transmits orders from the bridge to the engine room working, and we can make bells ring for people. That's really cool.

So I keep on learning. I recently did a talk for Turnstile Tours, where, because I was also doing a talk for a near competitor, I wanted to make it different. We decided to focus on the system of aids to navigation, and my ship was a lighthouse and buoy tender. A lot of the people who come to the ship have never seen a buoy. Most people know what a lighthouse is. If they've seen a buoy at all, it's usually just a little marker for a swimming area. They haven't been offshore enough to see a buoy that a ship uses for navigation. It's always been a challenge to explain that to people. First, what is a buoy, and why does anybody need to tend it? So to tell the job of the ship, I have to understand something about that system. But to do the talk, I had to go into it deeper than I had before. I had to educate myself a little bit more to do it.

I'm often doing it right ahead of teaching it to someone else. But I did that in libraries too. We would subscribe to a new database and I would learn it, and I would do a presentation to a class

of students to teach them how to do it. Maybe that goes back to my quick learning and adaptability in a new environment because I was changing schools all the time. But that's part of the job. And I take questions that I get on tours. I'm willing to say I don't know when I get a question from a visitor. But I will try to find the answer so the next time someone asks me, I'm ready. So it impels research, and talking to our experts, or looking it up. So I am constantly learning.

Q: Can you talk about founding the Historic Ships Coalition?

Habstritt: Oh, sure. So one thing I became really aware of in working at *Lilac*—I was often going to other historic ship operators to understand something about regulations, or sources of material, or how do you deal with this agency, or that agency. What did you do to get inspected by the Coast Guard? Things like that. And how valuable those contacts were and yet, there wasn't any forum for us to get together and share our experiences. In particular, the Intrepid [Sea, Air and Space Museum], which is like the elephant in the room, didn't need the rest of us and did their own thing but undoubtedly had valuable experience and information to share. And South Street Seaport, which had its own collection of ships. While most of us—and there were quite a few individual ships like the *Lilac*: the tug, *Pegasus*, the Waterfront Museum and Showboat Barge, the *Frying Pan* lightship—many historic vessels in the city that are operated individually by a really small organization or even one person trying to keep that ship afloat. They don't really even have time to talk to anyone else in depth. Wouldn't it be great if we could all get together and help each other?

So I managed to get everyone in a room a couple of years ago. It was actually sponsored by the Historic Districts Council because I had applied to them to have a virtual historic district since we aren't all in one place, but have the historic ships considered as one of their Six to Celebrate. I had applied for that and I was told their board thought it was really interesting but the Waterfront Alliance could support us. So we didn't need the support of the Historic Districts Council. I said, "Wait, wait, wait, no. The problem with the Waterfront Alliance is it's trying to be everything to everyone on the waterfront and we're getting sort of ignored. We haven't been able to rise to their attention. We aren't getting any help from them."

So I got, with the Historic Districts Council sponsoring, I got the Waterfront Alliance and the Intrepid, the South Street Seaport, and all the individual ships I could find, including the oil tanker, Mary [A.] Whalen, the fireboat, *John J. Harvey*, and other ones that I've already mentioned. The main thing that's come of that though is, because so many of us are stressed and strained by just keeping our non-profit or commercial business that's on a historic ship going, we haven't gotten together to speak of since the first couple meetings. But we have a listserv where we share information, and just doing that has created a sense of community that I think we didn't have before. So I'm happy about that.

We have testified as a group at some waterfront hearings and although I feel that my idea of the group being an advocate where—for instance, *Lilac* is berthed in Hudson River Park. Maybe there's a policy that Hudson River Park is proposing that I feel would be detrimental to the ship, but they don't look too kindly on a tenant criticizing them in public. If I could feed the information through the coalition and have someone else be standing up at the podium giving the

testimony—that's not associated with the *Lilac*—that was really my goal. It hasn't completely come to pass—but partly—and I do feel good that we continue to talk to each other.

Q: You said that the *Lilac* is making some good headway right now. What are those current projects and what do you see in the future? I know that's pretty uncertain for a lot of us. [Laughs]

Habstritt: Yes, well, I will say that we have pretty limited funding. We started out with—how do I want to say it—a financial picture that wasn't really sustainable. When I came in, it was entirely being funded by my husband and no fundraising being done by the board whatsoever. The board was pretty much letting Gerry make decisions. And even though he felt overwhelmed by the decisions, he was spending his own money, so they weren't really worried about it. It was hard to get their attention to say maybe this isn't the best way to spend money. It also worked where, once the bank account went empty, they would just ask Gerry for more money. So there's no motivation to save any money. What's wrong with this picture? So many things. [Laughs]

I have been reforming that and we are getting, for us, some significant individual donations, and we're continuing to grow in that regard. The other thing is we're very dependent on volunteers. We have funding for one staff. I volunteered until last year. So I've been a volunteer for ten years running the whole thing. That causes really uneven staffing. It causes projects to get started and stalled because the person leaves to do something else. It's definitely affected our progress. We've had people who have great expertise but don't stick around, or people that stick around and don't do a really great job [laughs] but it's what we've got. I think it's created a bit of haphazardness.

I feel we have some good people involved now who are sticking around and who are good project managers, and able to see their way to the end of the project and pursue it and get it done, and plan the next one with the skills to carry it out. So that's different. I think as an organization but also me personally, I'm just less and less tolerant of people who aren't actually doing—[laughs]

Q: And have you been able to do remote programming?

Habstritt: Yes. So far, it's been in partnership with other groups. I'm really the only one working on administrative and educational things, and it's just me. So learning new systems like Zoom in a short amount of time in order to produce something is not easy. I'm trying to keep all the other balls in the air too, to make sure our bills get paid.

Fortunately, we were approached by some other groups. I mentioned them already, I think: Turnstile Tours and Untapped New York. We'd had a tour planned for Untapped New York that we planned before the pandemic, for June, and I contacted them and said look, I don't think things are going to open up by June yet. Do you want to convert this to a virtual tour? Because I noticed they had started producing virtual tours. So we did that. And I knew one of the staff at Turnstile Tours who had approached us about doing a presentation. So they had people skilled in video production and moderation, like Stefan [Dreisbach-Williams], who moderated the Turnstile Tour, was really great at organizing it—giving me a list of questions ahead of time, staying away from questions that I told them I didn't have the answer to, and keeping the

conversation going. I had learned some stuff just before giving the talk, so I was a little less confident than the second one I did, which was sort of a revision of talks I had done before.

Anyway, they got us up to speed faster than I could have done it on my own. We've always, I think, taken advantage of partnerships like that. We've had a long-time partnership with The River Project, which does environmental programming on the ship. When I was new, we didn't have the capacity to create our own educational experiences. Just giving them a key to come in with school field trips and pull fish traps up and show kids what's swimming in the Hudson—I could say, "We served eight hundred school kids this year," when all I had to do was coordinate the calendar. So partnerships have been really valuable, and I definitely say, any small organization starting out, that's a way to move ahead faster with your efforts is to partner with someone who already knows how to do it.

Q: As we come to the end of our conversation, I just wanted to ask you what your thoughts were about the future of waterfront preservation in the city, and where things are headed, as decisions are being made about the next decade.

Habstritt: Well, it's so in flux right now. But one of the things we talked about in the recent panel that NYPAP sponsored was the S.W. Bowne Grain [Storage] warehouse, which burned in a suspicious fire about a year ago. It's, by far, not the first fire on the waterfront. In the 1970s, it was a way for owners to get rid of a building that they weren't able to rent out or reuse, and collect on the insurance at least. It was kind of notorious around then.

Another site in the time I was active in Williamsburg and Greenpoint was what most people know as the Greenpoint Terminal Market. It was originally the American Manufacturing Company, the world's biggest rope manufacturer. I will say that's the second time I said "world's biggest." New York City was often the center of a lot of these industries, and it's part of what's significant about a lot of these sites. They were the first, the biggest, the best in their field. The Greenpoint Terminal Market—a few years after 9/11—but it was being called the biggest fire since 9/11. Suspiciously set. A homeless guy who was scapegoated turned out to have an alibi. No one was ever found guilty of setting the fire. It was clearly arson because it popped up in several different areas of the building. The owner had been marketing it for sale on eBay [Inc.]. So we're pretty sure that it was an attempt to clear the site.

I think the fire at the S.W. Bowne Grain warehouse was similar. Again, it's suspicious. It was a development site. The building's probably been damaged enough that it will have to be torn down. Another thing that sometimes owners do is they just stop doing any maintenance at all, hoping the building will fall down. They call it demolition by neglect. So that happening about as recently as a year ago.

Another site we talked about briefly was the Lidgerwood [Manufacturing Company] factory in Red Hook, all low-rise buildings that were, I believe, still being used for warehousing and got torn down for a UPS distribution center with very little notice. So the clearing of the waterfront is still happening. One thing that I haven't heard in particular about those but that gets used a lot for these former industrial buildings is that they're "underutilized" sites. That's one of those words that lets you know that they're going to tear it down and probably put up luxury condos

because that's a better use, right? It brings in more tax revenue for the city.

With the whole pandemic and the economic impact of that, I have trouble seeing what the future might be. I would have expected that kind of behavior to still continue, but now, where I think no one is going to be able to sell luxury waterfront condos for a long time, I think that could really change it. I'm not sure. Things will definitely slow down for awhile. I don't know for how long.

Q: Yes, it will be very interesting to see. Is there anything else you'd like to add that I haven't asked you yet?

Habstritt: [Pauses] Nothing that's striking me right now.

Q: Just looking through my notes as well. I think we talked about everything that I had made note of. Well, if there isn't anything else that you'd like to add, then I think we can end the interview there. Okay, great.

And I'll just ask you to keep your browser open while this recording uploads. So it will say "processing" like it did before. I think it will take about ten minutes. But with that, we can close Zoom and I'll hang up our call, and like I said, just leave your browser open. Let me know if you have any questions.

Habstritt: Yes, at some point, I would like to talk to you about all the documents from all these efforts. I don't think the Roebling Chapter has found any archives just generally, and I think the

preservation aspect in particular has really just been me. I created the position of Preservation Chair and I went after these places on my own, while informing all the membership and getting them involved and trying to activate them as part of it. I used the name and the power of the name and the number of members to push the advocacy and show that we had standing, that we were knowledgeable, that our opinion was based on understanding something about the site that other people might not understand. So I've got lots of letters and copies of testimony, reports, and some digital, some paper, some in both. I trust paper [laughs] in a way that probably only a librarian can. I've given—like the administrative stuff, I've passed on to the secretary of the Roebling Chapter, but the preservation stuff, I've hung on to because I'd like to have my own copies of it all, for one thing. But I'd like it to go somewhere and not be lost.

Q: Yes, that sounds very important. Okay, great, well, thank you so much, Mary.

Habstritt: Yes, thank you.

Q: I hope that you enjoy the rest of your day.

Habstritt: Yes, you too. Bye-bye.

Q: Bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]