INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Eric K. Washington

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Eric K. Washington conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on June 11, 2021. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive 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.

Eric K. Washington is a third generation Harlemite who grew up in the Todt Hill area of Staten Island before moving back to Manhattan as a teenager. It was during this time that he became a "walker." He says, "I would just head off somewhere with no particular destination in mind, usually just aimlessly, which for me was kind of the most fun," and led to many explorations and discoveries, some of which would emerge in or inspire some of his later work, such as articles he wrote on Free Black settlements on Staten Island.

In 1997, Washington was contracted by the Landmarks Preservation Committee to research and write a designation report for St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Manhattanville, the neighborhood where he lived at the time, which led to in-depth research and writing that resulted in the publication of his 2002 book *Manhattanville: Old Heart of West Harlem*. Washington started giving licensed tours in 1998 focusing on the history of Seneca Village, a Free Black and Irish settlement that was razed to create Central Park. As Washington continued to trace the histories of Black communities and place-making across New York City, he has uncovered much history about the Trinity Church Cemetery, become involved in stopping the demolition of Hotel Olga, conducted research in support of landmarking Colored School No. 4 in Chelsea, and published his celebrated biography, *Boss of the Grips: The Life of James H. Williams and the Red Caps of Grand Central Terminal*, among other projects.

In this interview, he shares many historical details and stories, offers his perspective on the challenges of preserving sites that tell the cultural history of Black New Yorkers, and offers advice on how to move between the information that's available at the time and what's missing from the historical record.

Transcriptionist: Matthew Geesey	Session: 1
Interviewee: Eric K. Washington	Location: video call
Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic	Date: June 11, 2021

Q: Okay, today is June 11, 2021 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Eric K. Washington for the New York Preservation Archive Project. And we're doing this interview remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic via video call. Because I don't have your signed consent form yet, do I have your consent to record this interview—?

Washington: Yes, you have.

Q: Alright. And can you start by giving yourself a brief introduction including your name?

Washington: Sure. I'm Eric K. Washington. I'm a native New Yorker, an independent historian, an author, licensed New York City tour guide. I have two books, one is a local history of Manhattanville, the West Harlem area, from 2002, and my more recent book is a biography of a Harlem figure—but it kind of covers a lot of New York from where he was born, in what was sort of Tenderloin "South," edges of what were known as the Tenderloin of the west side, now fashionable Chelsea—who was one of the first wave of Black Harlemites to settle in the area in the early twentieth century.

And what else? I'm based in Upper Manhattan in the Sugar Hill area of Harlem, Washington Heights, Hamilton Heights as it's gradually being called—not gradually but certainly with much

more gumption than historically. Most of my writing and tours are focused on Upper Manhattan with a few exceptions.

Q: And can you tell a little bit about where you grew up, who you grew up with, any lineages that are important to you?

Washington: Yes, well, like I said, I'm a third generation Harlemite but I grew up on Staten Island. So my grandparents moved to Harlem. My grandfather moved here from Florida, my grandmother from Barbados, in the 1920s. My father was born in Harlem. My late mother, who he married in 1952, was from Florida. And when they got married, I came along the following year. My first apartment was just a few blocks away. It was a walk-up tenement that I probably couldn't afford to live in now [laughs]. In those days, it was just kind of not that fashionable. But I lived there for three weeks until I was taken, kicking and screaming I'm sure, to Staten Island, where I was raised for my formative years in the Todt Hill projects area. And when my parents divorced, I moved back to Manhattan with my father and then have lived other places since.

But basically I'm a New Yorker. I was born at a hospital on Cathedral Parkway, just across the street from Central Park, which is now a condo. It was Parkway Hospital. My roots are here. I was baptized in the same church where my father was baptized, which is a landmark church in the city, St. Martin's Episcopal Church, which is often cited as being one of the finest examples of—I always get this wrong—Richardsonian Romanesque style church architecture in New York, or maybe in the region. So those are my roots, my local roots.

Q: Do you know what motivated your parents to move to Staten Island?

Washington: Yes, I think they were part of that generation where—this is early 1950s. Harlem is no longer in vogue, was no longer fashionable the way it was. It was hard-pressed economically and for services. I think it was part of that common idea of a wave of young Black marrieds who thought that the suburbs would be a nicer place to raise their kids. They would have a lot of space to run around if they had a house, a backyard and that sort of thing, and nature all around them. So I think that was the primary impetus. I think, in retrospect, certainly for my father, who grew up in the tenement streets of Harlem—my mother grew up in Jacksonville, sort of very middle-class, in a house, the head of the household was a pharmacist. I think it was much more comfortable, as I piece this together in retrospect, for her, except for the fact that we were living in the projects. Her consolation was that it was the most middle-class projects of the whole NYCHA [New York City Housing Authority] system. She always wanted a house. I think for my father, he was really out of his element with all this space.

It was an "integrated neighborhood," which is to say there were Blacks and whites who lived in proximity but socially it was segregated. It was divided. But it was mixed in the sense that I grew up with Italians, Irish, Jews, not so many Latinos but they were there. And among Blacks, there were Native American Blacks and West Indians. So it was a real interesting hodgepodge of the time. But I think it was part of that—that people felt that this is where you raise kids, a place where they can breathe, where there are trees and that sort of thing.

I hated it. [Laughs] I really did. I think maybe because I was a shy kid growing up and I was not

one to just walk around the woods by myself. I liked the woods but I think I was the type that expected lions, tigers and bears to jump out at every turn. So I think when my parents divorced, the idea of going—there were other things at stake—but the idea of going to my dad's in the city was really very exciting. One exciting thing about growing up there though was Todt Hill is the highest point on the Eastern Seaboard when they deign to count Staten Island. Or I should say it used to be because the public dump, which is being converted into a park, Fresh Kills [Landfill], surpassed that. The unnatural dump became the highest point. But we don't count that. But from our perspective, living in the projects on this highest point, geographical point, on the top floor of the projects, the sixth floor, which faced northeast, I guess it is, I saw all the city skyline like Dorothy coming out of the woods in *The Wizard of Oz* and seeing the Emerald City. So I grew up with that sort of thing, "Come on over, come on over." "Run away, run away."

So I think the city was always part of my consciousness growing up in Staten Island. I didn't mind leaving it. I have a whole new attitude about it. I wouldn't live there again but I have a whole new appreciation for it being a place where things really did happen. I think, growing up, I thought, "Nothing ever happens here. It's boring. It's just trees." And a lot happened there that we weren't taught about in school and I think that pieced itself into my attitudes about preservation. There are things that are still there that speak to people's ambitions, people's struggles to survive, to get by, to accomplish things, neighborhoods, a cemetery that I was researching a few years ago that I had never known about, Frederick Douglass Memorial Park. So I look at it with different eyes now that I'm twenty miles away from there.

Q: And how old were you when you moved back to the city?

Washington: I was sixteen in 1969.

Q: Can you tell me about what that experience was like?

Washington: It was June of ’69, so I was fifteen, about to be sixteen in August, yes.

Q: Yes, what was that experience like?

Washington: It was stressful in the sense of divorce—we were in the middle of that. My brother stayed with my mother on Staten Island. My brother’s three years older. So between fifteen and eighteen, it’s a world apart. For me, it was like sailing the Seven Seas. It was exciting. I was going to the city. I think in my heart of hearts, I was always an urbanite. I don’t necessarily have street sense or street smarts, which you pick up. It was part of a learning process that wasn’t part of my background. But I always had this predilection for a lot more brick than bark. Oh, let me write that down. That’s a good one. [Laughs] I’ve never said that before. I like that! But it’s true. I just felt more at home there.

Yesterday, part of my long day yesterday was I went to the premiere of *In the Heights* and much of it takes place in Highbridge swimming pool, and that was my first job. Here I am, fifteen, sixteen, and my dad does what all dads do with their teenage sons, “Well, you’re not just going to sit around and do nothing. You’re going to get work.” And he uses his connections to find me jobs that every teenager hates. And my first job was at Highbridge swimming pool. There were

no musical numbers going on in the pool at the time [laughs]. But that was kind of exciting. I would walk—it wasn't exactly close. We lived in Esplanade Gardens, so in the 140s in Harlem, and that's [Highbridge Pool] like 175th Street. But I would walk there and walk back and I was just fascinated to walk the streets and every few blocks it was something new and fascinating. I did that a lot and I just became sort of a walker. I would just head off somewhere with no particular destination in mind, usually just aimlessly, which for me was kind of the most fun and just watch things and absorb things. That was just very exciting.

So coming over from Staten Island to the city, to Manhattan, to Upper Manhattan, really had that kind of impact on me. It was a new adventure for this teenager. I was still commuting to high school on Staten Island. So I didn't tell them the back story, that my parents were divorced.

[PORTION OMMITTED]

I was taking the bus down to the ferry, taking the [Staten Island] Ferry across, getting on the train, going up to Harlem and repeat that in the morning. So that's a good—going to Staten Island from Upper Manhattan is a day trip. I probably wasn't doing too great in school because I was spending a lot of my time just exhausted. But also fascinated. The things that I was seeing were just more fascinating to me at the time than the school work that was being taught.

But it also extended that nomadic life of mine. So it wasn't just walking around Harlem, making trails, discovering the trains, and the ferry boat ride. Even though it's just a short back and forth, it's never tedious. It's always kind of fascinating watching people and wondering where they're

going, occasionally talking to people. And you're picking up things, you're picking up information from where you live in the city and you're bringing that back to Staten Island. You have a whole new kind of sophistication just from living in another place that has a connection that you're able to make. You're able to insert that into conversations.

I remember I had started a Black history and culture club in high school during this period. I remember taking a bunch of us to an exhibit. It was at the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art], "Harlem on My Mind." And that was a big deal for a bunch of Staten Island kids to kind of go into the city on our own, unchaperoned, not a school trip, just of our own volition. So that was all part of the thrill and I think importance, the significance of that venture, that teenage venture of moving from one location to another. But not directly, not permanently, kind of shuttling back and forth before it became sort of a permanent move.

Q: Can you talk a little bit more about the Black history and culture club that you started? What was the impetus for that?

Washington: I think a lot of it was a part of its time. This was on the crest of the Black Arts Movement, the Black Power Movement, the 1960s and whatever other movements were happening in the '60s, all the hullabaloo. All the things, rock and roll, everything is happening. The '60s were just kind of exploding since the Vietnam War. So we were angry about things, and there was [Bob] Dylan. Whether you followed those things or not, just by osmosis, we were a product of all of that.

Also the Civil Rights Movement. We were conscious of a lot that we were getting from home, from our parents' experiences and our parents' conversations that were not part of our curriculum but that we knew existed. There was nothing in our books about—obviously it was still in the news—say, Martin Luther King or Malcolm X or the Black Power Movement or the Black Arts Movement or any of those things, which were unfolding, but certainly nothing of the past that our parents said so-and-so was famous for this or this that happened. There was none of that.

So the impetus was to bond. We were a minority in the school. We were numerous but we were still a minority in the school and really unrepresented in terms of everything having to do with curriculum. There were a few good teachers who were interested but they also weren't equipped because they didn't have the materials to share with us. I can remember one or two teachers. There was a Mr. Reddick and I can't remember his first name but he was really wonderful. I think he sussed out that I was actually traveling to school because he drove me home one day. I think I made an excuse that I was visiting my aunt or something like that in Harlem because I didn't want to let it be known that I moved out of the neighborhood. He was concerned but was too cool to say he was concerned. He was a Black teacher, who I think was young enough where high school was not that far behind him and he was probably younger than most of the other staff. He understood the urgency, kind of like these crazy teenage hormones kinds of things where we were dying to learn something, to experience something and walk to the beat of a different drum. Where are the drums? [Laughs] So he might have been the one who actually told us about the exhibit and how to get there, if we didn't just figure it out on our own.

That was the impetus for it, just to kind of fill in many of the blanks, and the blanks were numerous, on our own, like it or not. Because I think we challenged a lot of teachers. We were teenagers and we were cocky. We demand this. We should have this. We need to know about this or we need to be able to wear our Afros or our dashikis or whatever. We were asserting ourselves the way kids were doing about whatever issues. I guess every generation does that across the nation.

Q: Where did you start to find, I guess, some container for some of the history that you were becoming more aware of and engaged in conversations about. It sounds like the container wasn't quite at school even though school was a place to assert, like you said, that some history was missing. How did you kind of go on to start to plant that in a way?

Washington: That's a great question. I'm not really sure. I think for different people, I think the container might have been the way we sort of found our interests and expressed them. Like I have an eidetic memory of going to an assembly and some of the students were going to do a dance performance to a song and one was my best friend, Claudine, and Margo and Barbara. It was three of them but they were dancing to Nina Simone's *Four Women*, which most of us hadn't heard. We knew of Nina Simone and I think maybe it was recent or whatever. It's a very out-there narrative song that describes four different Black women, sort of archetypes. But that might have been one of the containers. They were finding their interest and their awareness of Black subject matter in music and in what their bodies were capable of doing, expressing in dance and translating, and their love of dance. Claudine didn't go on to be a dancer but she became a journalist. I lost track of Margo and Barbara.

But I think in those ways, which kind of made sense for teenagers in high school, they were sort of finding their interests and being able to put them in a certain area or test them with their own, in this sense, in dance with their bodies, in the sense of sharing it with others, their ability to transfer that information, to teach because dancing can be, in its way, a teaching opportunity.

For myself, I'm not sure what I did. I'm kind of a slowpoke at a lot of things and I think I take in a lot of things and kind of store them—I'm almost a pack rat [laughs]—and kind of store them mentally as well as on my desktop before I figure out how I want to organize them and then disorganize them, and rearrange them or cross file them, if you will. So I'm not sure how that experience at the time was immediately contained in any particular occupation of mine. I was still going through my process of experimenting and learning. But it certainly was impactful. It was shaping me in some way—not in a way where you could look at it and say that's where this came from. Some stuff I would find years later and say oh, God, I don't even remember I did that or wrote that or that I was even interested in that. And then it kind of sort of comes back to me. I've approached a lot of things like that, you just kind of pick it up as you go and you ride it on your back and if it falls off or falls into another pocket or something, you'll find it later. Then there are certain things that you're clutching because you know you want to kind of keep track of. And sometimes you switch them, when what I've been clutching is less interesting than what I just found in this back pocket.

It's a rambling answer your question, I'm not really sure of the answer to that for myself.

Q: It actually sounds like you were collecting and embodying, to an extent, that information as opposed to outputting it immediately.

Washington: I know that when I first started publishing articles in ’85 and sometime a few years after that, I had gotten an assignment that was a local history assignment and it had to do with Staten Island. I had learned about this Free Black Settlement on Staten Island, Sandy Ground, which had been established like in the 1830s, preeminently among Black oystermen from the Delmarva Peninsula area. I’m like, what?! I’m from Staten Island and I never heard about this! They had been there that long? I’m going to school a century and a half later. This was not in school. So I was fascinated about that.

So a lot of that old information kind of started sinking, filtering back in, like asking my parents, did you ever hear about this place? And hearing my parents’ impressions—like my dad, as I said, he grew up in tenement streets. He said, “I just remember them having shacks.” These were houses! Because I went out there. My father was saying that something that’s made of wood is a shack. No. [Answering rhetorically] And it reflected his experience. And my mother would say something opposite because she grew up in middle-class Black communities. So the communities had a different shape during their respective upbringings. And I’m sort of in the middle of this because it’s—we lived in the projects but we were surrounded by houses. So I kind of knew both.

That assignment and a few others made me, tipped me to want to be involved in local history. I said oh, there’s something there. Because I long had a feeling of nothing ever happens here. I’m

just going to move to Paris. Everybody does that, you want to move to Paris or some exotic place. And then you go there and they're dealing with the same sort of boredom and ennui, that every urban center has. The grass is always greener in somebody else's backyard. But Staten Island, that idea, a place where I thought nothing happened, where all of a sudden, I was getting that there's no place that doesn't have history. That helped me to recoup a lot of the things that I was picking up casually along the way from my late teens and early adult years, and being able to reexamine them critically and say what is this, or what was this, and apply it. That's where that came from.

So it had some transferable application that I wasn't aware of at the time as I was going through life and just taking things in, pocketing a few.

Q: And what did you do in those intermediate years between graduating high school and when you first started looking into local history?

Washington: I pursued acting—that sounds so usual. I went to acting school at the HB Studio and Stella Adler Studio. A lot of the things I've taken up have happened accidentally. I've tripped into them. From acting, I've tripped into writing, and writing, I've tripped into local history. I worked in restaurants like every actor [laughs] in New York does. I did that and that was my bread and butter for most of my adult life, which was ideal because there was a lot of freedom in that, in the American restaurant system. You could take off days to go to an audition or to go to the beach. There was always somebody wanting to fill your shift if you're waiting tables. Now, if you're managing, you can't. If you're a manager, you're there routinely, for about

the same money [laughs].

So I was able to do assignments when I started writing and still—you're not living off of that—and still be able to do bread and butter, waiting tables. And that was useful also because I worked in a big place. It was fairly international in terms of staff and clientele. Certainly, in terms of staff, it was like the UN [United Nations]. There were always groups of people that reflected different waves of immigration in the world. I got to speak a smidge of conversational Croatian because when Yugoslavia dissolved, a lot of people were coming over from there. And then a lot of Indians and a lot of Bangladeshis. From South America from various countries. And seeing how people from South America from various countries interact with each other: no, that's not how you say that or laughing at each other's pronunciation or references, the same as what we do.

I think working in a restaurant, in an urban restaurant, is so valuable because it's about organization, obviously, because you have to feed people on time. But you also interact with other human beings from other experiences. I mean, I was spoiled because I worked at Tavern on the Green and that was one of the largest restaurants in the world at the time. Being large, we just had the largest staff that was much more diverse. But it was exciting in that sense. It's not that way with every restaurant but it gives you a sense of even vicariously being part of other people's ambitions because you're working with a lot of students who are doing this as a part-time job.

I worked with people who had passed the bar, they were lawyers. They're still at entry-level or

trying to get into entry-level. They've got, now, credentials for it, but waiting tables is what's keeping them and their families fed. Some were medical students or even doctors. A lot of actors, as I said, or dancers, people in the arts. So it was a great way to become aware of all the issues of the world, certainly politics, race, LGBT issues, and even preservation issues, the arts, anything that was filtering through the news waves and through these human beings who we were working with.

Q: Now I know that you said, when we talked awhile ago, that you don't really identify as a preservationist. We can go into that now or throughout some of the rest of our conversation—that's up to you. But I did want to ask about some of the first sites—whether they be places or neighborhoods, things that kind of coalesced into places—that you wanted to start researching or uplifting.

Washington: Yes, and I think when I say I don't identify as a preservationist, I'm not in any particular organization. I think invariably if you're a tour guide, or certainly if you're an historian, you're interested in preservation. But there are people who are dedicated to preservation issues and the politics—every field has its own politics and things like that. So in that sense, I'm not any kind of academic preservationist. My sympathies, though, are for preservation and certainly I've been involved in preservation-specific issues. I've done designation reports. I'm sorry, repeat your question. I lost track of it.

Q: Sorry. I asked about too many questions at once. Can you talk about some of the first sites or locations or neighborhoods that started to grab your attention and that started to focus all of your

interests in doing some interpretative work or research work, tours?

Washington: I would say in terms of doing research. and maybe even preservation, I had gotten an assignment in 1997 from Landmarks, the Landmarks Preservation Commission. It was when, at that time, they were farming out designation reports to freelancers—not staff people—because like any bureaucratic agency, they were backlogged and overwhelmed. I think they had money to do that. So they wanted to landmark St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Manhattanville, which is the oldest church in continuous service on the same site, not just in the Manhattanville/West Harlem area but in the entire Harlem area, which is all of Upper Manhattan going up to the seventeenth century definition of the Harlem township, if you will—the congregation, not the church building itself, not the structure itself but the congregation.

So I was living basically around the corner, a couple blocks away on Tiemann Place, and I thought this is a cool assignment because I never had done a designation report. I had done articles. It's different but it's research. So I'm looking at old records and that was really exciting for me because I wasn't casually asking for permission to look at old records for a freelance article. This is a report for a city agency!

But part of doing the designation report is to put the property in historical context. So invariably because I lived in the neighborhood, I'm doing my own local history. So St. Mary's complex got its designation and then I was hooked because I had all this information. I was like oh, my God, this neighborhood is like—it was famous [laughs]. You know, what happened. It was provocative, the information. I often cite this one article from *The New York Times*, 1912, that

was saying that the Manhattanville area, because of development, most traces have been erased. In another ten years, all traces will be gone. In my sort of natural contrariness, it's like well, let's just see about that. I'll just put my shoes on and walk outside.

And I was excited to see that there were still extant traces that reflected—you had to do a lot of extrapolating in some cases but in some cases it was quite clear where this old town existed, that was still distinct from what we recognize today. Or how what we recognize today were just extensions of what used to be. So what used to be the stagecoach line is a bus route or is the train route. Or these oddly shaped streets, where Old Broadway was the Bloomingdale Road and it's preserved by this other name but it's clearly not the [Manhattan Street] grid. Or if you look at a map and you look at 125th Street, it looks like somebody—some malicious person—took the West Side and bent it [laughs]. That has a back story to it? Why is that? [Asking rhetorically]

As a matter of fact, this year celebrates—celebrates in my mind—this is the hundredth anniversary. In 1921, they changed the name of the signature street of Manhattanville, which was Manhattan Street, to 125th Street, so that it would have one name going from river to river, which meant that they had to change the names of all the other streets because the higher streets became names or numbers. So the original 125th Street became today's LaSalle Street, 126th Street became Moylan Place. There's a sign there but there's no place. Tiemann Place, where I lived, was 127th Street, appropriately because Mayor Daniel Tiemann lived there and his paint factory was on that block. 129th Street became St. Clair Place. Lawrence Street became the current 126th Street.

But when you look at those on the map and you're looking at the grid and you see 125th Street bends, 126th Street bends. What's up with that? You can tell a story about how that came to be and why that is and why there's some name-streets here and what they used to be. These clearly defy what *The Times* was saying at the time and predicted—because they still exist—that everything was erased. There are these testaments to an older time, an older village, that predated the grid that we recognize and a few extant buildings that are there, including St. Mary's.

So there were things like that. That particular project was a sea change, I think, in my interest because, at that point, I took the tour guide's exam to get a license. And I started giving tours of Manhattanville, which nobody was doing. Everybody was like, what's in Manhattanville? Isn't that a college upstate? Yes, it is. But of course, they had started in West Harlem when it was Manhattanville. Those sorts of things.

So I was able to kind of translate that into—New Yorkers loved it. I think we love two things. We love to think that we know everything [laughs] but we also love being sort of one-upped, like oh, God, I didn't know that. We're not unfascinated. We're not closed. Most people who would come on tours were locals, some of whom taught in the neighborhood school, PS 43, which said Manhattanville Junior High School etched in Gothic letters on the door, who had been there for years and never crossed the street or knew anything of the back story. So that was really interesting.

And when I saw that people were really interested in that sort of thing, I just kind of moved on. All these neighborhoods, all these people that you meet when you're doing this kind of research,

they always lead you to somebody else or some other place, so they're all connected. When my *Manhattanville: Old Heart of West Harlem* book came out in 2002, it coincided with my moving to where I am now, 153rd Street, a block away from Trinity Church Cemetery. So when I started roaming the cemetery grounds, I was fascinated because cemeteries are like parks but with footnotes. So at one point, I got to the cemetery office and they had a brochure and on the brochure it had notables in the cemetery and there were five, which begged the question for me, how many people are buried here? To which they said, about 24,000. Like 24,000, five notables. So I knew I had a project.

Over the better part of twenty years, I have continued to identify people—not necessarily celebrities, some just regular folks who they ought to know about—and build up tours, which I've given for almost twenty years in the cemetery. You can stand in one spot and say well, Madame [Eliza] Jumel, her house is still here. It's the oldest house in Manhattan. And one of her pallbearers was the man who sold Trinity the property and he's buried here, Richard Carman. You can stand in one spot and reintroduce people, like, "Astor, wake up. No, not you, <u>the</u> Mrs. Astor, I'm sorry."

A mayor, Mayor Cadwallader D. Colden, I rediscovered—he was there but he was just forgotten. I was looking for his son, who I knew to be Charles Dickens' best American friend, who had hosted him during his first visit in 1842. There's multiple graves and I'm looking at the stone and I see Cadwallader D. Colden, and I knew this man. I think he was a mayor. How many people are named Cadwallader D. Colden? [Laughs] Actually a number of them and they're all father-son, father-son, they alternate. I'm thinking, this guy was the mayor. Why isn't he one of the five

in the brochure? But also he was fascinating to me because he was an abolitionist. He was the president of the New York Manumission Society. This guy is really, really important.

It wasn't just the celebrities who I was interested in in the cemetery. The cemetery was established in 1843. A lot of people that were buried there were former slaveholders or had possibly been formerly enslaved. There was a "colored ground," as it was called, a segregated ground, of a couple dozen people that was completely lost when they widened Broadway and the bodies were just lost. The archives told me about it and I documented all the names of the people and where they lived, where they were from or what institutions had buried them. They've just disappeared. So that was interesting to me too because I was able to, for a number of years, give a Black history tour of Trinity Church Cemetery, which has no evidence in burials of African Americans, but what you see is only part of the story because here's a fellow in this grand mausoleum. He's interesting in and of itself just by looking at the building that was built for him, for his remains and his family, but his records reflect his circle, his circle also being the people who worked for him by dint of enslavement.

And also his interests. There was one fellow I'm thinking of there who was—it was enlightening to me—he was one of the two brothers who made their riches off of groceries and there was a story that in 1836, he was interested in a violin. So he put an ad in the paper that he wanted to buy a violin. And it said that for the next two days on Water Street downtown, the streets were lined with "Negros"—the term they used—with African Americans with violins, which was interesting to me because I thought, I knew Blacks played music. I didn't know exactly what instruments were favored at what time. But it also indicated that a lot of them made their

instruments, violins, that were for purchase. And he took them all and supposedly labeled them and decided who he wanted to buy from.

So it sent me on a whole other bent of research. What were people listening to? What were they playing? Who were the Black violinists that were playing at the time or in those decades adjacent? So it gives a whole new texture to the cemetery. I say an urban cemetery gives context to—it's a great way to learn about the city and its growth and the movers and the shakers and the issues that were afoot at the time because everybody dies. In an urban cemetery, particularly like Trinity Church Cemetery in Washington Heights, it really is a microcosm of the living city at large. You can cover any subject that you talk about in life in the cemetery. Like I said before, race, the arts, gender, LGBT issues, class, anything you will, politics, military. There's no limit to that.

So all those kind of little projects kind of contributed to my interest in not only who's there, what they did, what they represented in terms of the time, but also what's left. Is the house that they lived in or the building that they built, is it still there? So it always sends you in different directions, those fascinating rabbit holes that sometimes are dead ends but, more often than not, are fascinatingly still vivid and even vibrant with some new kind of life.

Q: How did you end up doing walking tours?

Washington: As I mentioned, I got my license in, I think it was '98 and I think at the time I only wanted to do tours of Central Park because I just thought it would be fascinating. I loved the

park. I spent a lot of time in the park. So I did an assignment for *Time Out* magazine on walking tours of Central Park, and I borrowed my brother's kids [laughs] because I heard there was one guide who was particularly good with kids, "Wildman" Steve Brill, who you may have heard of. Have you taken one—?

Q: I've been on one of his tours, yes, an edible plant tour!

Washington: Yes. And he was great with them. One of them still remembers but my niece, Liz, she was always the more bookish one and she brought a pad and she wrote down stuff and they brought home samples, which of course, the parents would not let them eat, or do anything with it [laughs]. But it was fascinating. It was wonderful. That was kind of my impetus for giving tours.

Getting my license coincided with an exhibit at the New York Historical Society on Seneca Village, which was the Free Black and Irish immigrant community that was razed in order to create Central Park. The site was being rediscovered through old maps and records. So I gave a series of, I think it was eight walks, starting from the Historical Society, their door, to the site of Seneca Village, which is not very far but you could fill two hours with it because there's always something to see and talk about in terms of building the park, landmarks in the park, going by Bethesda Fountain and talking about Emma Stebbins and her liaison with Charlotte Cushman, the actress. The politics of statuary in the park, because her *Angel of the Waters* was the only one that was actually commissioned, yet you don't think of the park without statues. Although Olmstead and Vaux were loath to the idea of having all the statuary in the park. Then we would

culminate at Seneca Village and talk about that.

So I did that for awhile, just doing Seneca Village. But then again, as I said, every subject kind of leads you to something else, so maybe I would discover somebody who also had a connection to here. There was one figure in Seneca Village, Epiphany Davis, and he was listed on some record that I came across in Manhattanville where I was living, so I'm going in that direction. Every tour kind of branched out as you're talking about different people and as you get a little bit more information about them or some event, you build up some sort of expertise on that other person or that other event or some other context or some other theme.

But that was the starting point was doing tours of Central Park. And now I haven't done a Central Park tour in years. When I go through there, it's just like oh, yes, I used to talk about that [laughs]. The city is fascinating that way because you don't have to go very far to really fill up a lot of time. There's really more to see and talk about than you would imagine. Even in the Manhattanville tour I would give, I would always start at the McDonald's, which has just recently been razed at 125th and Broadway. It's the noisiest spot because the subway—not the subway, it's elevated at that point—but I stop there on purpose because I have to shout and lose my voice, as I'm starting to do now, because it gives you a sense of it being a crossroads of two main streets. But it was always that. It was the Bloomingdale Road and Manhattan Street. You get the traffic coming to and from the river and up and down the mainland of the island, if you will. And we do a circle and we end up at the river and it's this big [indicates short distance] of a walk but it fills up two hours. And sometimes I have to watch my watch and catch up because there's all these little sites that have so much information and really are fascinating. And they are

distinct and sometimes sui generis. Then you realize it's a whole other valley to the area that was known as Manhattanville that can be covered but you don't really need to do that in order to get a sense of its complexity. You only need to take a bite and you'll be chewing that bite for a good two hours and will be sated.

The same with the cemetery tours I would give. When I only had the five they mentioned and a few add-ons—it's a small cemetery, it's twenty-four acres, which is not very large—and I would do both halves. It's bisected by Broadway. But everybody is tired and the westerly division from Broadway to the river plunges. It's so steep. So you have to mount it by this sort of switchback through the cemetery. So that takes time because you're not going in a straight line. If you went in a straight line, you would be exhausted because the hill is that steep. And then I realized that both sides are interesting but the more dynamic one, which costs more because it's more dynamic visually, was the westerly division. So I only do that one. I'll give a mention to the easterly division, where you have [John James] Audubon and Robert Bowne Minturn, where the colored ground had been, and that sort of thing. But people can still wander to that. You'll get a sense of its complexity from such a little package of terrain by just doing one part. And now I have so many people—even in the westerly division, I rarely get up to the top of the hill anymore because we've covered so much ground.

Q: Would you like to give some space to the African American part of the cemetery that had been uprooted, to the history of that?

Washington: Yes. So as of 1853, Blacks started burying in Trinity Church Cemetery Uptown.

Notably, the Colored Orphan Asylum, which was a famous disaster, a casualty of the draft riots in 1863, came afterwards. So a colored ground had already been established as a separate segregated area for—many of them were institutional burials belonging to various asylums, if you will, and the deaf and dumb establishments, Deaf and Dumb Society, as it was called—now New York Society for the Deaf. That was the terminology and the name at the time. The Juvenile Asylum, which was in Upper Manhattan. So a lot of these institutions around the city had burial plots in various places, Green Wood [Cemetery] or whatever, for when staff died or, well, they called them inmates, people who lived there—we think of inmates as prisoners but not that—when they died. So they belonged to the institution.

So the city continually raised the bar for where public burials could take place in Manhattan, until finally in 1847, there was the Rural Cemeteries Act, which forbade burying on Manhattan, although it made exception to Trinity Church Cemetery, which is still the only active cemetery on Manhattan Island. But it permitted a lot of rural grounds, say in Queens or Brooklyn—farmlands—to convert their farmlands, which were not necessarily doing wonderfully, into more lucrative burial grounds. And you can see, when you ride the highway through one area, you've got burial grounds on both sides. It's like you're driving through a burial ground. I think there was a limit to the acreage. In some instances, it's the same owner but maybe it's a different corporate name that established it on both sides of the highway in different counties, in Kings County and Queens County.

But as they're raising the bar in Manhattan, a lot of Blacks who had been buried in Manhattan, or were going to be buried where their churches had grounds, would end up elsewhere off the

island. Then there were a few who were buried Uptown. Then the draft riots occurred, the Colored Orphan Asylum, which had been burying in a different city—Brooklyn at the time, in Green Wood—now when they moved back, they moved further uptown from where they had been on 5th Avenue and 43rd Street to what was Washington Heights, specifically known as the Carmansville area of Washington Heights. And they asked Trinity permission to bury their dead there, which they gave. And it seems that the Colored Orphan Asylum grounds and colored public grounds were one and the same or at least they were adjacent. Trinity's archives are not sure exactly where they were. They can sort of deduce about where they were but the record kind of runs out in terms of how it was administered or what became of it.

What became of it was hinted at in the news when, by about 1869, a few years after the Civil War, they [city planners] finally get up to upper Broadway to lay out the street, the Bloomingdale Road, which we come to know as Broadway. It's like "everything must go," like in the stores. So if you got burials in the road beds, which they were, because, still, even though it was a road, the Bloomingdale Road, it's still basically a country road. You don't have Broadway traffic like you have today. And as they widen the road, the bodies that are there are to be redistributed elsewhere. One of those that's not exactly in the road but it's on part of the road that's going to be widened was the mayor who I found, Cadwallader D. Colden, who was a prominent figure that all the public knew and he's credited strongly with helping to end slavery in New York in 1827. So he's a revered figure and he's at the corner of 153rd Street, my street, and the Bloomingdale Road. They get notice that he's got to be moved. So his son, David Colden, moves him to the westerly division on the other side and puts him next to the Astors, where a lot of Astors were buried, probably figuring they knew each other—they're old friends.

If you visit the cemetery though, he's really literally off the beaten path. So you have to go off the path and kind of climb up and look at this other group of headstones before you find him. So he's an easy place to be forgotten. He's one of the notable casualties. But as they widened the road, that happened. They built a suspension bridge to connect the two halves of the cemetery, which lasts for about forty years. And this is possibly the first suspension bridge in Manhattan because it predates the Brooklyn Bridge, but it's not going over water so people don't really think of it that way. But for forty years, it's part of the iconography of the island. And then by 1911, the bridge is demolished in order to lay the foundation for the current Church of the Intercession, which is there now. And in that process, they dig up some empty coffins, and that always makes news. So there was hedging. According to the news—I think it was after the article in *The Times* trying to get some information—and then finally a representative from Trinity, a spokesperson, says that they believe that forty years ago, a workman when they were widening Broadway must have disrupted the graves and put back the empty coffins so it wouldn't disturb the count. So we don't know exactly who they belong to. But no trace of any the names that I certainly enumerated, or that are from the burial ledgers that Trinity has, have been found. So if they were dispersed elsewhere, no stones are apparent, and that remains a mystery.

So I would love to see certainly some sort of acknowledgment of their presence there because when you're buried, you like to think—and your family likes to think—that eternal rest means that. Whether there's a marker or not, you know where to find your loved one, to commune with your deceased beloved. And that's not there. That's not apparent other than to tell the story. And

one of those figures, which helped me to corroborate the existence of this, which, as I said, Trinity provided me the initial information—I think they would even find out more about it through researchers—but one of the people who was buried there was Lucy Nichols, who was the matriarch of Manhattanville's Black community. She was a parishioner at St. Mary's Episcopal Church. So I knew her from my designation report and her family were known activists in the suffrage movement and the anti-slavery movement. They hosted a suffrage meeting in 1816 of Black electors who came up to Manhattanville because it was too dangerous to meet downtown because people were trying to keep Blacks from voting.

So they went eight miles out of the city—uptown, but people weren't saying uptown in the same way then—to Manhattanville. So the Nichols were involved, and she was involved. The census records identify her as a midwife, so who knows how many people she brought into the world, probably white and Black, in Upper Manhattan. She was buried there, and there's no recognition she was a member, a parishioner, of Trinity Church. There were grounds that were called parish grounds and church grounds, which kind of sound like they're the same but they're not. One was for actual members and one was for, more or less, the more public grounds. But there was another category of segregated ground if you were Black. So she was buried there.

Another interesting burial that was there was Charles Wia Hoffman from Liberia. So there was a movement of Blacks going back to Africa in this African colonization movement, and usually to Liberia, or, if you were going from Canada, to Sierra Leone. So it was strange to see somebody from Liberia coming and being buried here in New York. But he was buried by the New York Society for the Deaf. He and his brother were both deaf, and the story—anecdotally, I'm still

trying to corroborate this—was that they were the sons of a chieftain, so they had some means. This missionary named Hoffman over in Liberia had brought them over with him—and they used his last name as their surname—to the institution as it was newly installed in Washington Heights, Fanwood. And Charles Wia Hoffman died early. He was about twelve years old and he was buried in Trinity Church Cemetery in the colored grounds in 1858. It tied into the subject of my book because James Williams's wife was from a prominent deaf family in Connecticut. She was hearing but both of her parents were deaf and a brother was deaf. Her mother had gone to the well-known school for the deaf, Fanwood, in Washington Heights in New York. She was in the first graduating class in 1858.

So it was interesting for me as I go along. It was a different project but she had to have known Charles Wia. He was from Africa. Even for other Blacks, he would have been exotic because he wasn't from 'round here, as they say. And he died while she was there. So you'll never hear any of those conversations, if they existed, but you know just by deduction, they couldn't get much closer. It was news if anybody died, certainly. So I can only imagine what stories she might have been able to tell—I saw him once, or yes, we were great pals, he was such a cute kid, whatever. So all of these things, they get under your skin—not under your skin as an irritant—but they provoke you. They intrigue you. They really get you going. What's next? What else can I ask about them, aside from the obvious things? You look at what they wore and how they moved about, the conveyances and all those things.

So a lot of that stuff tips back to my neighboring cemetery. I would love to see some sort of memorial that is permanent that recognizes their presence. I also think, to my surprise—and then

not surprise because Blacks have lived everywhere in Manhattan and because Blacks have been here as long as whites have been here in New York—that some of the burials were from addresses that were in Harlem. This is decades before the famous Black Harlem, before anything like the Great Migration or the Harlem Renaissance or that initial wave of Harlemites that Williams was a part of, at the beginning of the twentieth century. This was decades before that and their addresses are there. So it attests to a presence of Blacks in every geographical area of the city.

Q: What do you think that your role has been in researching this and also speaking about it on walking tours? In the public knowledge and potentially preservation of this space.

Washington: Well, I think it's been useful. I always hope that it goes beyond just nifty and cool, that it's actually useful. I mean certainly I give walks and talks frequently in academic settings, or for academics who want to get their students out of the classroom, because a lot of the stuff is just not in books. A book might mention Harlem or Trinity Church Cemetery or Manhattanville or wherever, Grand Central Terminal, but not really be able to impart the sense of the dynamic, the ballet of movement in the area. Or really highlight people, unless they were celebrities, who lived there or who moved about there. Or emphasized the fact that obviously communities are not populated by celebrities. They're just regular folk who live there, who are the engines of the area, of the locale.

So I think it's been useful to them because, as students walk about, whether it's actually on foot or through a PowerPoint presentation, they can see things, like this is where you're sitting now.

This is what was there before. This is what it looked like before. This is what your house looked like when it was in black and white [laughs]. To see things through a different perspective, I think it's useful in making students of any age—students not in the strict sense of just being pupils but teachers too—or just locals curious and want to do a little digging themselves. I get that a lot from people. Oh, I was on your tour once, or a few times, and I went back and looked at it. I get a lot of people who have a connection already. Sometimes they know or sometimes they learned a connection just by a name that I mention. It's like oh, we're related to the Groveners going back this many years or whatever, and can share something I didn't know or wouldn't be able to have access to knowing about somebody I'm talking about because their name is on a plaque in front of me, or their headstone is in front of me. So there's this real interchange.
I think it's been valuable in that regard.

But also in a sense of—the city has always been busy, it's always been bustling. But it bustles often to a different flavor. We don't always have the same occupations that were active at one time or vibrant at one time. Sometimes you have to explain, "that was somebody who whitewashed walls." People had jobs. You have to explain that. Then you struggle about how people had certain kinds of jobs, like the red caps. "Why were they all African-Americans?" So it's not just that Blacks thought this was a cool job to have because we get to wear these cool uniforms. It tells you something about the social dynamic of the city, about Jim Crow [laws] that was not just a Southern thing but a Northern thing. It prompts discussions on how Jim Crow played out differently—same theme—in one locale as opposed to another locale. So that's, I think, always useful to me.

One of my favorite monuments in the cemetery, it looks like a Greek temple. I mean, it's modeled after that. Architecturally, you would see this shape if you look at the San Remo Apartments masking the water towers on Central Park West, and it looks like that in the middle of the cemetery. And it's not unusual as a form for cemetery architecture. But you think somebody very grand lived here and when I tell them this was built by circus money—the man who built this headed a circus. And I can show a poster. He's actually in the annals of circus history and there are annals of circus history. There's a Circus [World] Museum, I think it was in Wisconsin. The oldest poster they have of the American circus is by Richard Sands and this is whose monument it is. And it's a dynamic poster. It tells people like oh, my gosh, who knew that circuses were that big a deal? You think, yes, there was no Internet, this was live entertainment. And then you start talking about how circuses came to be. You had live acrobatics and you had people who ran menageries with exotic animals. Then they got together and you have these groups that were like the ampersands that connected the acrobatics troupes with the animal harnessers or whatever. And sometimes they interact with the acrobatics on the animals or vice versa.

So it gives you all this fascinating back story surrounding this Greek temple-like structure that seems so incongruous. But that's part of what makes history fascinating and New York fascinating because here it is in our backyard.

Q: I wanted to ask you about Hotel Olga and learning about the cultural history of that location and efforts around keeping it from being demolished.

Washington: Yes, the Hotel Olga. I'm trying to remember how I first came upon it. I wrote a piece on the Harlem Renaissance retreat for African Americans. And when we speak of Harlem and Harlem hotels, everybody speaks glowingly of the Hotel Theresa, with good reason. It's a beautiful hotel. It towers above the low-scale skyline of Harlem, but it was restricted. And it didn't open up to Blacks—well, it opened in 1912-1913 but it really stood as a citadel of exclusion until 1940. So that's a few decades that it's just in your face: I'm here, you're not. Until it opens up to Blacks in 1940, Blacks are traveling and need places to stay when they come into the greatest city of all cities, New York, and the capital of Black America, which is Harlem. So what to do?

So the Hotel Olga opens up in 1920 and it's being touted as saving Harlem's hotel industry. So there were places to stay. There were boarding houses. There were a few small hotels. There was the YMCA/YWCA and there were a lot of people that took in boarders. If you look on census records, you see head of household and often you'll see "lodger, lodger," "boarder, boarder, boarder," whatever. And in those cases, you often had to know somebody to introduce you. So you had to do a lot to find a place. It wasn't like Airbnb or whatever.

I was doing some work on Times Square history and one of my assignments ran out but I still had access to ProQuest for the information I needed for that assignment. So my boss said, if you're working on something else, feel free to use the site. So I look up Harlem, and I think that's where I first found out about Hotel Olga. And then there was a preservation plan that Community Board 10 had put out—I think this was about 2012—on recommended places to be landmarked. It was a dozen places and Hotel Olga was on there. It was just a tiny dot. And I

think it was probably that people had heard about it but weren't really sure of it and needed to get this brochure done. But when I saw the location, it was 145th and Lenox Avenue—I mentioned my folks lived in Esplanade Gardens—so my bedroom window, when I lived there, looks out on 145th and Lenox Avenue on the northeast corner, and the Olga is on the southwest corner. So it's diagonally out my window.

So I looked at it for—I lived there for a few years, however long—it meant nothing to me. It was just an old building, and I looked beyond it to the Hotel Theresa, standing up next to the Empire State Building even farther away. So now it's fascinating to me because "Oh, my gosh, it was hidden in plain sight! Who knew?" And it becomes all the more fascinating to me because it was there all the time.

So as I started my research, I could see what it represented. I'm reading the articles in 1920, who's staying there, people are coming from all over the country. Every Black newspaper has not just an advertisement for Hotel Olga but it was popular at the time to have a listing of guests who checked in. I think, now, if you were a celebrity, you'd be appalled to have your name listed [laughs] because you want solitude. I don't want everybody to be in my business to know where I'm staying—we've got paparazzi for that. But in those days, it was useful because it was so hard to find a place to stay and if you were an upright respectable person and you're going to a strange place, you want to feel you're going someplace with some sort of an assurance that you're not going to get in trouble, you're not going to be harmed. Even if you're not harmed, you're going to come back home with your reputation intact. So you're reading the paper and see, oh, Louis Armstrong lives there, or so-and-so stayed there, a business man. Madam C.J.

Walker's agent, whatever. So you get a sense—even if you don't know the people listed, of where they're from, or they might be familiar names. But you get a sense of assurance that this is a respectable place.

And the owner, Ed Wilson, ran a tight ship. He was the brother-in-law of A'Lelia Walker, who was the daughter and heiress of Madam C.J. Walker, the first African American self-made millionaire in the country. It was popular for as long as the owner was alive, he died in 1944. So a good quarter of a century, this was one of the places to go if you were visiting Harlem. And people indeed came from all over the world, particularly from across North America, but also South America, Central America, and even Europe and Africa. If you're Black and you were traveling to New York, that was the place to stay. And a lot of them are names that we recognize. Bessie Smith stayed there. Alain Locke, the Dean of the Harlem Renaissance, stayed there. The Black pilots who flew cross country—[James Herman] Banning and I'm forgetting the other one's name [Thomas Allen] but as soon as they landed, they went and checked into the Hotel Olga.

So it was a real disparate and diverse group of people—athletes, sports teams that came to New York to compete stayed there. So it was a whole fascinating history. It was built at the end of the nineteenth century. It was part of this vision by John D. Crimmins, who was an important contractor for the city in a lot of projects that we still recognize today, like the making of the elevated railroads, the subway station underground, putting telegraph cables underground. But he also started buying a lot of property and he was noted for having the cleverness and foresight to buy corner properties. So when he died in 1917, a vision of his for buying the property to begin

with had died. He had bought these two blocks from 143rd Street to 144th, and 144th to 145th, between Lenox and 7th Avenue which is now Malcolm X Boulevard and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard, with the idea of creating a special neighborhood, a la the King's Model Houses on what we know as the St. Nicholas Historic District, better known as Strivers' Row. And the first of those two blocks, the southernmost one, was developed and for some reason or another, only the building that would become the Hotel Olga was developed. The rest of the block laid undeveloped until it was auctioned in 1920, three years after Crimmins's death. And so it didn't lay fallow—if you were ever a kid and you saw a vacant lot, you played ball. You ran on it. It was occupied. It was known as the Lenox Oval and was used for sporting events. I have a photo of a baseball team that James Williams created, the Grand Central Red Caps baseball team, just prior to the Negro Leagues, and they're standing in the bleachers at Lenox Oval. And it's just blank with the exception of this building. And in 1920, the lot gets developed and the hotel building that's there is renamed the Hotel Olga and it becomes this famous hotel.

Unfortunately, it peters out in use by the 1940s. Most recently it had been a gym. I think it was renovated in its interior probably in the '90s and used as a gym. And I was visiting my folks and on my way over, they were putting up that scaffolding, sort of an apron, and I'm thinking, "Mayday! S.O.S." [laughs] I look at my folks and [quickly] "Hi, Dad." I go straight to my old room and look out the window and there are workmen there. I'm thinking what the hell's going on? And it was probably too late. So I did an RFE, Request for Evaluation, from Landmarks. There already was a demolition permit given, I discovered, after doing some hasty research and trying to get people onboard. I did huge posters and stuff like that. I think it just came on too late. So I was giving tours for Municipal Art Society and other groups. We'd start from the Hotel

Olga and I could tell the story of it and the Lenox Oval and it was of keen interest. And it was just very, very sad because it was one of the last of these big structures in Harlem that represented the Harlem Renaissance. We've lost the Lafayette Theater and the Renaissance Ballroom and so much is going. It would have been, I think, really quite—I think, easy. Nothing is easy, but with no great difficulty—because it was pretty much intact, even though this building had straddled three centuries—to keep it and convert it into some use that would be a permanent reminder of what built this, who stayed there, what they represented, what the owner represented, Black enterprise and Black travel habits. It was always mentioned in the famous Green Book that got deservedly renewed attention.

So it met with the wrecking ball in October 2019. That was it. And it's still just a vacant lot. They haven't developed on it. For two years, it's just been vacant.

Q: Can you talk about the LGBTQ significance of the site as well?

Washington: There was some. Like I mentioned, Bessie Smith stayed there, Alain Locke. So there were figures who are often cited as being contributors to the richness of LGBTQ history. It was a hotel. I mean, we'll never know everybody who stayed there and how they identified or what they did or whatever. But you can assume that, for any cosmopolitan hotel, it's there. Even just being able to cite a couple or a few figures who figure into LGBTQ history gives you a sense, just as a microcosm of a microcosm [laughs], that there must have been <u>more</u> because there were few places for people to stay. And also, not only that there were few places for people to stay but it was a coveted place to stay because of its reputation.

So that's why that's of significance. I think the [NYC] LGBT [Historic] Sites [Project] online has a tribute to Hotel Olga, much of that was on research that I did, people that stayed there, who were identified as lesbian or gay or bi, who were documented to have stayed in the hotel. There were not events there—even though it's gone, I think, I don't pass up any events that may come to me or that I could suss out because it still builds up a case for what it was. It did not have a ballroom.

What it was before was the Hotel Dolphin, which had a ballroom and was famous for dancing and stuff, and it was called that from about 1914 until 1919. And that was a place that gave a clear illustration of the neighborhood changing from a white community, as Harlem broadened as a Black community, to the bounds of 145th Street. And it was a big to-do because another fellow I wrote about, a silhouette artist at Coney Island, E.J. Perry, was also the cook there. He was the chef and he quit because he was ticked off at the management for refusing to let Blacks work the bar when clearly the clientele had become mostly African American. Or, it was still a mixed crowd, which was very telling because, given the zeitgeist of the time where whites could be ridiculed for socializing with Blacks, it was a place desirable for whites who wanted to go and dance, particularly the tango. That was the place to go in 1914 when the tango craze broke. And it was also, during the armistice parade after the First World War, when the Black soldiers of the Harlem Hellfighters were marching up, it culminates around the bend past the Hotel Dolphin. But this is the same building that becomes the Hotel Olga. So it's got sort of that back story as a different establishment but everybody knows the site. It's probably part of what sells the Hotel Olga because it doesn't have to advertise where it is. Early advertisements say it's formerly the

Dolphin Hotel.

It's a shame because it's got so much to tell us, to teach us about how the community grew, how it enterprised. The owner, he was somebody who—I'm still interested in doing a biography of him. I'm working on somebody else now and it takes time to do those. But I've got so many notes on him and he's a fascinating figure but he had a little dynasty going on because he not only had the Hotel Olga but he bought what was formerly McAvoy's Saloon, and there are photos of it you can find online, right across the street on the northwest corner. And he renamed that the Hotel Curry and gave it to one of his housekeepers. Anecdotally, she was not just the housekeeper—I don't know if people just give hotels to their housekeepers—so there may have been a romantic liaison but she was a very savvy housekeeper and hotel proprietor, manager. And they worked together and particularly, in 1939, they were advertising their seventy-five rooms together, between the Olga and the Curry, for the new World's Fair, twenty-five minute drive, because they're right at the foot of the Lenox Avenue Bridge. We call it the 145th Street Bridge now.

But then he had another place two blocks down on 145th Street, which was the Witoka Studio, which was more or less a reception hall. So people like Billie Holiday sang there. You had wedding receptions there, benefits for the Scottsboro Boys. Dizzy Gillespie had played there, so a new generation. I know there was a cast party there for members of *Four Saints in Three Acts* by Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein with Eva Jessye, who did the choral arrangements there. All these disparate and diverse affairs and functions. There were a lot of social clubs that had meetings there.

So he had this dynasty of these places. Clarence Darrow, there was a smoker that the NAACP hosted there, that the owner, Ed Wilson, gave them the use of the club for no charge. So I think it's a fascinating story about Harlem's development and doing for its own, at times when it's not getting the benefit of being in a democracy, of being part of the American Dream historically, and they do their own thing and very well. He's worth a whole book in and of itself.

So I'm not done with the Olga. I mean, the footprint is there. The building itself is gone but there's enough that we know about it that we can attest to its significance and its important contributions.

Q: Yes, I wanted to ask, when the building itself is gone, based on the work that you do, what options do you have to continue doing this kind of applied preservation work?

Washington: Well, now, of course, it's no longer preservation other than in the sense of interpretation. So to use the vernacular, it sucks [laughs]. It does. Because you don't want to reduce historical sites to a plaque. And plaques are great. There's a lot of places where I can see "You Are Here," and you should have a plaque because everybody is walking by. But if that's all you can do, then do that.

In another way, there may be very few options you have left other than to put a plaque there that says something, that gets the conversation going. And it sucks to have to say it's better than nothing, but sometimes it is that. The building's gone and it's not going to be rebuilt. And even if

they rebuild it and call it the Olga, it's not. The Renaissance [Ballroom & Casino] was demolished. It was rebuilt as a complex and I think they're calling it the Renaissance-something. The provenance is not there. The name has just been plucked and reapplied and that is not it. It doesn't cut it.

So certainly, in the interest of preservation, it's never a good thing to lose a property. I'm working now on another property that features in my book and I had done an RFE for in 2018, which got a favorable response from Landmarks, for what was known as the Former Colored School No. 4, which became Grammar School No. 81. And this was at 128 West 17th Street. It's a little three-story building that you could walk right by, most people do. You don't notice it. But it was a Reconstruction Era racial caste school that the Board of Education maintained for African Americans. My subject, James Williams, would have been one of the last students that studied there before it was dissolved. And it came out of a long tradition of segregated schools, colored schools, a separate system run by the Board of Ed that came out of the African Free School, which Mayor Cadwallader Colden, the abolitionist, was president of because they were created by the Manumission Society. Again, they're all kind of connected.

But this school is of particular interest architecturally. It's not glamorous but it was a cookie cutter school that was after a design from the 1840s for public primary schools. And there were diagrams about how they would be laid out, the floor plans, and they all basically looked the same. I think this is the last of them, that they've all hence disappeared. In that sense, this would be the last trace. In this sense, that's architecturally significant.

In a cultural and historical sense, it's very important because the head of this particular school was the first African American principal in the Board of Ed[ucation] system, Sarah Tompkins, who became Sarah Tompkins Garnet, who was made a principal on April 30, 1863, while the Civil War is going on, in New York. And, not directly, but most of her career is at this school. She's an activist, she's a suffragist. She's a "race woman" as it's known. In 1870, when it's a new school, she starts a speakers forum for adults, for the public at large, because that's what she does. She knows you need to have discourse and conversations. And the first speaker to start the series is Henry Highland Garnet, who, after Frederick Douglass—or maybe equal to Frederick Douglass—is the most famous Black speaker in America. And he's married, his wife is an activist—and Julia, she dies a few years later—and then he ends up marrying Sarah Garnet, the principal—Sarah Tompkins who becomes Sarah Garnet. So it's another one of those stories where women always get short-changed in this. They fall through the cracks because they don't get the prominence that men are given. But also when they marry, they often change their names, or they have all these names to keep track of. Now what should we file this activity under? [Laughs] So she's often known as Sarah Garnet and she's just a dynamo. She's associated with people like—in her later years, W.E.B. Du Bois, who speaks at her funeral, and the investigative reporter, particularly on lynching issues, Ida B. Wells. So she's associated with the school.

Also, another prominent teacher, J. Imogen Howard, who was the only Black manager at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago representing New York women craftspeople. And she was a Bostonian originally. She came down to New York and she taught at the school. She lived, actually, with the Garnets on MacDougal Street, and their house is still here, which should be landmarked. I think it's part of the landmarked district actually. And she was a music teacher and

she worked with a lot of the students that became famous like Walter F. Craig, who was one of the most famous Black musicians of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, and the first Black musician to be admitted to what was then an all-white musician's union. Walter F. Craig's Famous Orchestra often was how it was billed. So he had been a student at the school. [Susan] Elizabeth Frazier was a student and then a teacher at the school and then became the first Black teacher of a mixed school, which is to say Blacks and whites together. James Williams, who became the chief of the Red Caps, the first Black Red Cap in the country and everybody emulated the system of switching over white Red Caps to all-Black Red Caps. It was an opportunity for all of these workers, particularly students, to defray their school costs while they were doing this job.

So the school was responsible for a lot of these things, just its placement. But it also reflects what was then part of the Tenderloin, which was a multi-racial community at the time, significantly African American at the time, which was why the school was there. And I think what saved it, unlike the Olga, which was private, is because it was part of the Board of Ed and when it was disenfranchised, it didn't just go on the market. It went over to another city agency. So the Department of Sanitation has maintained it for decades. So it's got that interesting history.

But again, it's always a battle with these things, particularly for African American sites, which are always underrepresented or sites that are not perceived as being—it seems to me that African American sites, you have to oversell in ways that you would not have to oversell other sites that are associated with the white population, or the general population. But my fingers are crossed. Like I said, I got a favorable response. I understand the city is backlogged and I gave them a

gentle reminder. I wanted to know what the status was. The problem is you can't really get that when something is in the system. But I got a very timely response from Landmarks that they are researching the building, so I'm hopeful. And the Community Board seems quite interested in me doing a presentation as we speak, in the next weeks, about this building. I'm hoping that it will justly be landmarked.

The city has a history with this. They know the back story. They landmarked, about twenty years ago, a similar school in Brooklyn, Colored School No. 3 it was called, in what was then the City of Brooklyn. So even though they were two different cities, their story was the same. They were still working within a segregated system. And actually, again, Sarah Garnet ties in to Brooklyn because she was a Brooklynite born and bred, but her career was in Manhattan. And after she retired, she goes back to Brooklyn and organizes the Equal Suffrage League. So her Brooklyn roots are never severed. Everybody wins with this building and it's conveniently located downtown between Harlem and Brooklyn.

Q: Can you talk more about this element that you said of having to oversell the sites that have significance to African American culture? What does that mean for people who are doing the research or writing the RFEs, like you are?

Washington: Well, for things that seem to me—and I think for a lot of other African Americans––to be obvious, and when you see comparable sites that have gotten attention, it seems like if you take it on, it's going to be a project and often unwieldy. It's not as if everyone doesn't already have their hands full with projects. And it's frustrating because—say, a theater like the Lafayette

Theater. I mean, it's so easily documented without even having to sell it what it represented just on a very clear level in terms of entertainment and the people who were associated with it, the notables, the careers that were made there, the experiments that happened there, *Macbeth*, the all-Black production by Orson Wells, the cross section of communities that came to see the programs, whatever. That is one example.

The Renaissance Casino, you shouldn't have to generate petitions and picket lines and things like that for things that. I understand that sometimes some things need selling. Some things need the extra energy. But there are a lot of sites that just sort of seem that this would not be a problem if it were [laughs] elsewhere. Why is that? Here in my neighborhood, more recently, there has been a site, an 1851 house that has been associated with the abolition movement and most likely was on the Underground Railroad. There was an argument against it from Landmarks saying that there's not a lot of documentation. But it's frustrating because the whole nature of the success of the Underground Railroad as part of the greater abolitionist movement was not having documentation. So you're asking for something that you can't possibly find—reasonably—because there wasn't a log of "today, we hid this family here. They were such nice people and we moved them on to"—that's not—somebody could find that and turn them in! It just doesn't make sense. So the paradigm of criteria, I think, needs to be revisited depending on the subject. You're asking for something quite impossible.

There's so few sites that are associated with well-documented participants and agents of the Underground Railroad and in the abolitionist movement, and I think there's often a focus on the Underground Railroad as a part of something else: the abolitionist movement, the Civil Rights

Movement. And certainly we're landmarking places that are associated with civil rights history. But abolitionist history is just as potent—that was the Civil Rights Movement of its time, and quite dynamic. It involved great stakes. There were life and death situations. And this is a house, 857 Riverside Drive, that has that kind of association.

Granted, there are issues. The house has been altered. There are other examples of houses that have been altered. The Hamilton Grange, also in my neighborhood, was altered when it was moved. Money came forward to rebuild it. It's still regarded as a historical property, as it should be. "Okay, this wing is from 2008. You oversee that." It was done with scrutiny. You don't always get your wish. It's not about finding something that is pristine.

So I think that having to oversell, which is currently happening now with the 857 Riverside property, inevitably puts it at risk of missing an opportunity, as the Olga did, and losing that. That was an opportunity that was missed by not having entities that may have had the wherewithal to use some sort of leverage to say, wait, wait, hold your horses. Hold that wrecking ball. Once it's gone, it's gone. What is this?

Part of what may have sparked a whole generation of people being interested in preservation was the rediscovery of the African Burial Ground downtown. The irony there is that you say "rediscovery" but the records were there. It was on maps. It wasn't as if people didn't know about it. What happened was, I think there was an assumption that, well, there's so much building here, it's probably gone, which is not really good enough—to go on probablys. And the buildings have been there for so long, it's not as if the buildings have changed over in the past

century. I can understand if something is constantly being churned up. But basically the buildings that are there have been there.

So there was a likelihood of finding something—as they did, and then again, some four hundred plus times they find these remains. So as I understand it, what saved that, and made them revisit the plan of the development was because it was a federal property and there is a mandate to do archaeology on the site. Now, I don't think that criterion exists for other kinds of development but certainly that's something that should be explored, whether there should be that kind of criteria, because anybody who is in preservation—or not, but with a general sense of how cities grow—can suppose that there might be something there.

All right, so you've got an old house, this one is from 1851, we know from the context of the adjacent landmarked district around it, what was there, how it came to be, who's associated with it. We know who built this house, what he was associated with. His activity as an agent on the Underground Railroad and the abolitionist movement is well-documented. So there's reason enough to suppose that there might be something to find there and that it's worth some sort of an injunction not to destroy it, and to possibly save it and rebuild it as it once appeared to the public, because once it's gone, it's gone. Once it's gone, it contributes to one of the oldest American themes of covering things up—covering up our history—which is to nobody's benefit, Black or white or anybody. It just gives you more work to do, to say this happened. How do you know it happened? Where's the evidence? It was there but you moved it. You're standing on it. It's frustrating.

It's a long answer to your short question, how does the demise of something affect someone as a preservationist. Sometimes all you're left with doing is some kind of signage but if you can shortcut that in the nick of time, then there is still time for entities to intervene and say hold up, let's look into this. We're being hasty. Why not do that?

Q: So what about a project like uplifting James H. Williams's story around a site that's hallowed and landmarked like Grand Central? What was that process like for you?

Washington: It was interesting because people were certainly interested. Certainly people who are interested in train travel—not so much in the engines and things, the diesels and stuff like that, but in transport. They're excited when they go to rail stations and airports and things that, and people-watching. People have responded, they really like that. I go there every year. I commute to work. And now they're looking at where Williams or Red Caps might have stood and the kind of work they did and why they had to do it, the fact that they were famously overqualified. Student Red Cap was kind of a thing and there would be headlines like "Ph.D. Student Carries Your Bags." Paul Robeson was a Red Cap, or this Broadway actor that I'm working on now was a Red Cap and was a showstopper every night in *Bloomer Girl*, or this doctor was a Red Cap. So people like that.

In terms of a permanent marker, I think there ought to be some sort of permanent memorial that's part of Grand Central because Williams is certainly one of the great heroes of Grand Central Terminal, who should be discussed when you're discussing its history starting with Commodore Vanderbilt, who built it all, continuing with Jacqueline Onassis, who saved it from the wrecking

ball, and to James Williams and his legion of men, who contributed to its being able to function, sustaining that reputation of Swiss watch precision as a railway station. And also influencing that system, the Red Cap system, in railroad stations across the nation because everybody copied what Grand Central was doing. So when the Red Caps were established in 1895 as an all-white system, that quickly caught on—and it quickly died out, because if you were white, multi-lingual, you were promoted elsewhere into the system.

So it was an opportunity James H. Williams took that you knew what the limits were—I can take this or I can leave it—but by taking it, it put him in a position where he's working, which that was kind of [laughs] the key thing. We know he was involved in early efforts of the Pullman porters, who were their brethren who rode the rails, who were also African American, in their early efforts to organize several years before they would finally be organized under A. Philip Randolph and then being in charge of all the Red Caps.

An interesting thing happened in this development because I often get the question, how did you get interested in this? Did you have a relative who was a Red Cap? Not to my knowledge. So when my mom died April of last year, she was raised in Florida by relatives—her parents died when she was young—and I had met them. When a loved one dies, you look in the records, and I have access to public records, and I'm trying to piece together a story for her obituary. Daddy Frank, oh, he worked at Jacksonville Railway. He was the James Williams [laughs], the head Red Cap, at Jacksonville and I never knew this! And so my answer—the book is out but my answer to most people who ask the question is "no, not that I know of." But it all kind of comes back to the same thing because he made a good living. It was a great job. It was in a position of

deference. It turns out he was in Washington, D.C. when the Red Caps were organizing in the late ‘30s, early ‘40s, and the railroads were trying to keep them from organizing. Contingents came from all over the country. Frank Leggett [phonetic] was his name, and he came from Jacksonville to recognize the Red Caps there in Washington, D.C. to speak before the committees.

So it’s like, what do you know? And to be able to make those connections, starting from the local setting, that only enhances—Leggett must have known Williams because Williams was kind of legendary among Red Caps. I don’t know if Williams knew Leggett. But it’s likely because heads of departments in the same field tend to kind of know each other even if it’s only like by a phone call or something, or a letter—“if you ever come to town, look me up” kind of thing. But I think there should be some sort of memorial to Williams because he has that kind of importance and it should be prominent.

You can’t come into the terminal without being wowed instantly, but there’s a plaque—there’s a statue of Vanderbilt that’s there that was not original to the terminal. It was moved from further downtown where it had been in 1929 to the terminal. And then there’s a plaque to Jacqueline Onassis. And there should be some sort of memorial to Williams and the men who worked there under a rigged system. I mean, they could not move up in the system but they were essential to the system. The system acknowledged that early on until they were trying to unionize later [laughs] and then they claimed they were just kind of indulging and they didn’t actually work for them, which defied everything that they had ever said and that was on record, and unsuccessfully. But the Red Caps did end up unionizing, for the better.

Q: What has the impact been on you writing this book, thinking about it having a different reach than, say, a walking tour where you're talking to ten, twenty-five people?

Washington: Well, I think it's tipping towards a new track, an interest in writing. Because writing a biography, often the way we learn history or remember history is associating it with some person who carries the history. And I didn't exactly see—you don't have to overteach me this—but I didn't exactly see that coming with Williams. I was sort of fascinated by the figure because I was asked to do a tour of Grand Central for the centennial. It wasn't really my beat but Municipal Art Society had asked me. They were kind of hard up because they had gotten the Commission to do daily tours and the training had somewhat got sabotaged by Hurricane Sandy because a lot of the docents who were going to give the tours were in Queens or Brooklyn, so they couldn't get in. The subway was still running, and I could get there.

So they sent me the material and I thought—well, I wanted to write about something and not about architecture because everybody's going to be writing about the architecture to praise the anniversary. So I knew there was a long history with African Americans and the railroads. I'm not necessarily a train buff. I mean, I like trains but I didn't know the significance of Grand Central to America's railroads. Again, I'm a quick study on it. I knew this from Central Park: oh, it's like "Central Park to America's great parks." Whatever happened at Grand Central, every other railroad station was trying to keep a pace of, and emulate whatever new system, whatever new fast train or something.

So that made sense. In that sense, I hit paydirt because when Williams was hired, it integrated the system. And the other Red Cap systems started to get integrated, and within a year, they were pretty much all-Black and that was happening across the country.

So reel me back in again, I went off on a little tangent. [Laughs]

Q: Sure. I had asked about the impact of writing a book about one of these particular subjects, yes.

Washington: Writing about somebody's life necessarily takes you through their life, through a lot of other lives and events and places, through the lens of their life. On the events and places part, that can be represented by dots on the map, which could be tours. So of course, the book came out just before the pandemic and the lockdown. So the tours were not walks but virtual walks. So I could show people where he lived. There are all these wonderful documents that are out there, census records, Board of Ed records. I could show who lived in the house, where the teacher lived at, that school, who lived in this house where he was born. It was a tenement that was built soon after the Civil War on 15th Street. It's still there. Again, I probably couldn't afford to live in it because it's now fashionable Chelsea. But it's still a house that's lived in. The school's still there. So I can show those things and I can guide people from Chelsea to the West Side to San Juan Hill to Harlem, along Williams's path. So in that sense, it's really augmented what I can do.

And a lot of the things you can't fit in a book. I had to pare down a lot of the images that I used, or some were just redundant. Some things just get compressed out of the story as you're

tightening it up but they don't become useless. That fodder is good for another presentation. I think what's great about the age that we're living in is that a lot of sites, you can use the Web and that's an extension. So here's the stuff that I couldn't show you in the book or here it is in color! [Laughs] It's black and white in the book. Or here is something that was really, really interesting but it doesn't really tie into Williams's story but you'll see that it's a great story. Then you can do something entirely different. So you can change focus.

So in that sense, writing a book has been very interesting and it's convinced me that biographies—and this is not an original idea but it was new to me, the value of writing biographies, of getting people interested. Because there are so many people out there, people that Williams associated with, who are certainly more famous in their field than he was—and he was well-known in his time—who are probably more forgotten than he is. And how does that happen? I certainly saw that happen in terms of geography, like in *Manhattanville: Old Heart of West Harlem*. Manhattanville has resurfaced with Columbia [University] building their campus there, which coincided with my book coming out. But basically, it had been forgotten.

So it was one of the more prominent neighborhoods, like Greenwich Village or Chelsea, throughout the nineteenth century. Then with the opening of the subway system, more people came from other parts, who did not associate with the different villages that configured the landscape of Manhattan. So it was just Manhattanville, Harlem was kind of yonder, and it just kind of became Harlem. So as those things sort of fade out, they get an opportunity to kind of fade back in and put into context. For a time, you generally spoke of Manhattanville in the same breath as Harlem, the Harlem/Manhattanville area, like you say Dallas/ Fort Worth,

Minneapolis/St. Paul, Sodom and Gomorrah [laughs]—the twin cities that are well-known everywhere. And I think the same with people. They kind of fade out after having enjoyed a great deal of prominence, not necessarily for any nefarious reasons, but people just move on and other things happen. Their story falls by the wayside and the new stories supplant them.

So it's a challenge to bring them back but it's fun to bring them back and I think it's important in many cases to bring them back because, when they're lost, it's not just their names that are lost but the context of what made their career or what made this place name gets lost. I am finding in the [Church] Cemetery sometimes that a lot of people who were associated with neighborhoods, who happened to be buried there—so [Samuel] Ruggles is associated with Gramercy Park and Union Square is there, Jacob Harsen who is associated with Harsenville. Ever hear of Harsenville? It was a 'ville that was known to all, around Broadway and 70th Street, 72nd Street in the nineteenth century, gone. But he's there and it's clearly marked.

There's one of the Schieffelins. Not Jacob Schieffelin, who's still buried under the porch at St. Mary's Church in Manhattanville, but the Schieffelins are kind of buried everywhere. So you can talk about Manhattanville. So you can stand there and talk about different neighborhoods by their founders, or great identifying public personages, who happen to be permanent residents of the cemetery.

So I think a biography is a great way of kind of regathering a lot of those personal and place names and events and then redistributing them in some sort of useful, fascinating way.

Q: Thanks for sharing so much about all these different projects that you've done. I think we can think about wrapping up what we're talking about today, and in thinking about that, I wanted to ask about future projects. How do you think that your work might be developing in the future, maybe not so much in terms of subjects, which you are welcome to talk about, but maybe in terms of format? For example, you mentioned that virtual book tours gave you a whole new flexibility with regard to what you can bring in.

Washington: I think my future project that I see now—and I decided this is going to be my summer project—is another biography. It's a figure I introduced in *Boss of the Grips*, who I knew was fascinating already. I didn't know how fascinating until—the pandemic was useful in that sense because I still have access to a lot of newspapers through a database. I thought that I could use some of this time to bolster what I already know. Not surprisingly, it's taken me down a lot of roads. I'm pretty sure there's another book here. So I was thinking biography all along but I was thinking maybe a group biography, and maybe it will boil back down to that because he's identified with some other people who I wanted to write about. Their paths are connected in some cases, in some other cases not. But the more I was finding about him, I'm thinking there's a lot more there than I thought. So I'm pretty sure he's going to be it.

But what I also think is what we've learned through the pandemic and having to resort to a virtual platform is that once this is lifted and we start going back to getting back out on the street, I think a lot of things that we've adjusted to in the pandemic are going to remain with us, and for good reason. One thing that Zooming does—or this version of presenting does—is it gives you a lot wider access than you would have on a walking tour, safety having nothing to do with it. You

can't talk to more than thirty people at a time without being hoarse. And you can't even be visible. People are leaning up, you can't see. Here, you can do it. Obviously, it's a different dynamic, but you can do it. So you can do both. I think that's what will happen.

I can see with Richard Huey, the person I'm talking about who I'm researching now, as I learn things—I did this with Manhattanville. As I learned something new, like a new site or something, I can organize like a little tour. Sometimes I started out with my neighbors who are interested, "We're going to meet here. I'm going to take you to something that you may not have known about." Like when I was on Tiemann Place, I don't know if you know about the Grave of the Amiable Child? He was buried a century before General Grant at Grant's Tomb [General Grant National Memorial] but a lot of people don't know that, unless you have a child in a stroller, or a dog that you're walking, or you jog [laughs], or walk aimlessly like I do, you probably don't know. It's a few yards away from the street where we live. It's like oh, my God, how long has this been here? Forever, dude!

I can see with Richard Huey, as I uncover things that he was part of, I can create a little map out of it. I can do that here. Here is the YMCA, he ran this theater program, that sort of thing. Writing the biography is still conducive to doing tours. There's a project now that I collaborated with On Site Opera, called *The Road We Came*, and it's a musical walking tour covering three sections of Manhattan, Lower Manhattan, mid-Manhattan, and Upper Manhattan, which is Harlem. So I did the scripting and the narration and then it surrounds this baritone, a wonderful baritone, [Kenneth] Kenny Overton, who will be debuting at the Met[ropolitan Opera] this season in *Porgy and Bess*, as we cover these different neighborhoods.

But it's great because the book was able to play into that. Williams is evident in a couple of sites, a couple of waypoints on this tour. There's the Former Colored School No. 4, which is the southernmost area of where his life was located, and then in front of his house on Strivers' Row. And then Kenny sings a song actually by a fellow who was a Red Cap while he was studying at the Institute of Musical Art, which became Julliard, as a composer. And he was actually well-known as an ethnomusicologist, John Wesley Work of the famous Work family. So he was John Wesley Work III. The first Work—without a Roman numeral—worked with the Fisk Jubilee Singers during the time in 1871 when they launched their European tour to raise money for their school at Fisk University. And then his son was a choral director for the Fisk Jubilee Quartet, and then his son, John Wesley Work III, moves to New York, living with another cousin Work, another musician, while he's studying and Kenny sings one of his songs. And his son, John Wesley Work IV, was a singer who actually just died a few months ago. I don't know if it was COVID but there was an obituary. I got excited because it looked like a son is still living, but then I found an obituary.

So that was exciting. He didn't make it into the book. Research projects like these are exciting because you know as soon as it's in print—you click "send"—and then people say, "Oh, I knew about that person. My dad did that." "Where were you when I was writing the book?!" But I knew that was going to happen. So there are figures like that who get a second chance. You missed the book, but we're going to get a great baritone to sing your song [laughs]. So the work continues that way, and I see whatever future project still being able to play out into tours and other formats.

Q: And maybe as a final question, I'd just like to ask if you have any kind of advice or guidance for anyone who's taking up preservation from the kind of angle that you have?

Washington: Yes. Any opportunity to go deeper, take it. And it can be frustrating. If there's a project that you're interested in, say, it's a building if you're talking preservation. It's a site. History is not about buildings and it's not about dates. It's about people. Obviously, if there's a building you're interested in, it represents—somebody built it and somebody maybe lived or worked in it and its style likely represents a trend even if it's the last representative of that style anywhere around [laughs], which often happens. But I guess the advice would be to find out whatever you can. And any opportunity, any rabbit hole—however discouraging it might look on the surface—try to go as deeply as you possibly can. See who lived there, who worked there. If another name comes up, explore who the neighbor was, whatever, those kinds of things. Just do as much searching as you possibly can around that subject.

But also, I think my advice would be that a lot of what I end up doing—and it's fun and frustrating at the same time—is interpolating what's missing because a lot of the history that's written is based on available information, but we have a long tradition of either suppressing information, concealing information, or forgetting information. And they all have the same result. And so sometimes the available information, for all of the honest effort to get across the right most succinct history of a place, is compiled from what you had available. From my point of view, trying to interpolate what's missing—like maybe an example would be in the cemetery. All of the examples of the people that I'm walking through—and the cemetery is fascinating for

me on a number of levels—but I'm like, all right, you lived here at a certain period of time. I know what was going on in the country at this time. I know slavery was still existing at this time. I know who were slaves. So this may not be what's in the biographical sketches that I find about you in the paper, or what's written in the programming or the brochure or whatever, but I think using the second sense of what was going on, if this person was really wealthy that they could have this great monument built for them and they're living at this particular time, who worked for them? Whether they were enslaved people or if it was after that period. What can you find out about the workers? What things did they do? Who was occupied in enabling them to make their living or their riches?

And that all kind of spins back to what you're looking at and to what you want the public to look at in your interpretation of the place as a guide or on a plaque. So I think that's my advice, is to try to be as circumspect as you possibly can despite the apparent dead ends, because often the dead ends are not as dead as they would appear. You can chip away at them. It's labyrinthine [laughs] when you're doing research. And as I said, it's the frustration and the fun of doing it. And the fun would be, when you take that back and you're standing there, you get a group of people together, whether it's in your kitchen, at a cocktail party, or on your walking tour that you've put together or your Zoom, you're the expert now. You know this stuff. "How do you know this?" Well, I got this document. You're in charge of the conversation, and that's fun. It's not just fun, it's important because it's incumbent upon you to share it. Otherwise, people would continue not to know it.

Yes, I guess that would be my advice, just to be as circumspect as you possibly can. And you

certainly have to do it when you're trying to uncover people who are not well-documented. I mean, that was the case for Williams and there's still stuff I know I haven't gotten to. I think, where else can I look, because he was not a man of letters. He didn't leave behind diaries. I was lucky, on one level, because he was mentioned in the paper a lot, whether it was just a list of people who were at an event, or he was quoted, or being interviewed. But in other ways, I had to think of who was he with. Let's see if so-and-so's papers mention having been at this event, and then I can picture the event more if somebody else describes the curtains or the details in the woodwork of the door, or what was served—things that Williams might not speak of but that I know from the context that he must have seen, because he was there. So it helps you paint the picture.

So in preservation, speaking of preserving sites—specifically physical structures—pretty much the same rule applies. You try to be as circumspect about finding and building the context that's there as much as possible, however trivial it seems and broad the implications it has.

Q: I think that's very useful advice. I think that's all my questions. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Washington: No, I may think of something when we hang up. Yes, I usually do. [Laughs] Now how are you transcribing? Do you have to do it manually?

Q: We have a person who does transcribing for us, human transcription. Thank goodness. That's not something I'm good at. Well, thank you so much. You'll hear from me in a few weeks, I

think.

Washington: Great.

Q: And good luck with your summer project.

Washington: Yes, it depends on if Archives will be open. I know I need to go to Yale. A lot of people's papers who this guy is associated with are at Yale and I couldn't possibly do it all in one day. So I probably need to check into a hotel or an Airbnb or something for a couple weeks or something. I'm playing it all by ear. Right now, I'm working on just getting the proposal together so it becomes sort of an official project, which is to say there's a chance of it being picked up. So anyway, this was great. Thank you.

Q: Yes, thank you so much. Enjoy the rest of your day. Take care.

Washington: Stay safe.

Q: You too.

[END OF INTERVIEW]