INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Peggy King Jorde

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Peggy King Jorde conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on May 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 they are 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.

Peggy King Jorde grew up in Albany, Georgia, where her father was an attorney and legal counsel for the Albany Civil Rights Movement and represented Martin Luther King, Jr. She brought the lived experience and cultural lens of growing up Black in the segregated South to her work in New York City, where she worked in the Mayor's Office of Construction under David Dinkins overseeing capital construction projects at cultural institutions.

She first learned of the African Burial Ground in 1989 from a fellow City employee, Harry Wurster, who came across an environmental impact statement of the site, which was being considered for development. Wurster urged her to bring this information to Mayor Dinkins's attention, and to take action to protect the site from development, given that it was a both a burial ground and a site that could tell the history of slavery in New York City, an important and often erased history. By 1991, King Jorde had the capacity and the green light—in addition to the deeply personal motivation—to start building a coalition of various individuals and constituency offices within the Mayor's administration who she felt could best tackle the issues unfolding at the African Burial Ground. Relying on meaningful engagement and public commentary, she assembled a group that included African American archeological professionals and members of the descendant community, who she led in her capacity as executive director for the New York African Burial Ground Federal Steering Committee, the entity that was charged with drafting a memorialization plan for Congress.

In this interview, King Jorde describes the process of working with multiple constituents to ensure that remains at the African Burial Ground were treated appropriately, and setting a new standard for Black leadership of projects that involve the preservation and interpretation of African burial ground sites. She also describes working with staff of the Landmarks Preservation Commission to establish a historic district for the site, and serving as Project Director for the memorialization of the New York African Burial Ground National Monument and Interpretive Center. She speaks candidly about the challenges she encountered at the site while working to center the descendant community and uplift Black professionals, Black artists, and Black interpretation.

Transcriptionist: Matthew Geesey	Session: 1
Interviewee: Peggy King Jorde	Location: remote via video call
Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic	Date: May 11, 2021

Q: Today is May 11, 2021 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Peggy King Jorde for the New York Preservation Archive Project. We're doing this interview remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic via video call. And because I don't have your signed consent form yet, do I have your consent to record this interview?

Jorde: Yes, you do.

Q: Thank you. And can you start just by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Jorde: My name is Peggy King Jorde. I am a cultural projects consultant and a global expert working on a number of projects having to do with cultural heritage and the preservation of African burial grounds in the United States and abroad. Prior to that, I was the executive director for the New York African Burial Ground Federal Steering Committee, charged with drafting a memorialization plan for Congress. As well, I was the project director for the memorialization of the New York African Burial Ground National Monument and Interpretive Center.

Q: Thank you. So I'd like to hear about a little bit of background of the African Burial Ground

site and kind of set the scene for the context in which it was identified and discovered.

Jorde: The burial ground site was an unappropriated area outside of colonial New York at the time, and was used throughout the early eighteenth century. It was located beyond the city wall, along Chambers Street. There was a law within the city, which provided that people of African descent could not be buried within the boundaries of the city. Although I can't recall all of the details—the land was in dispute at some point—but there was permission given to bury enslaved and free African people in this area. The site is believed to have spanned the equivalent of five New York city blocks and was located near the Collect Pond, an area which was often used for industrial purposes.

The burial ground was in use for many years. And when I got involved with the project, I was working for the Mayor's Office of Construction and it was brought to my attention by a man named Harry Wurster—Harry worked for New York City's Parks department [Department of Parks and Recreation]. He actually worked in City Hall Park. Harry was totally fascinated by historic maps. He was one of these city workers who knew everybody in the mayor's office. He would go around and talk to everyone about plants and other passions. He and a couple of other guys worked in City Hall Park planting the flower beds and all that other parks-related work.

So one day, he sent a note which read, "Peggy, let's have a brown bag lunch." We got together, for a brown bag lunch at which time he brought to my attention an environmental impact statement, which was done because the site was being considered for development. But there was this history of the African Burial Ground, which was included—a description of the site was

included in this environmental impact statement. And at the time that the site was being considered for development, the site was a fueling facility that was owned by the City of New York. For those of us employees who have used city cars for site visits, that's where you fueled the car and where city cars were kept parked.

So that's how I became aware of the site's significance.

Q: And what was your response to finding out this information and what was, I guess, Harry's intention in sharing this with you?

Jorde: It was certainly one of surprise. I was born and raised in southwest Georgia under an American apartheid and grew up during the Civil Rights Movement. My father was a civil rights attorney and was legal counsel for the Albany Civil Rights Movement and represented Martin Luther King. My cultural reality, having been born and raised in the segregated South was my lens. And then coming to New York, of course, particularly given what you've been taught in schools—you have a totally different perspective about what you think New York's history is all about.

The site description in the environmental impact statement was one that was really quite surprising and certainly a shock for Harry because Harry touted that he was born and raised in New York City. He was German American, and Harry considered himself quite the history buff, on New York City. He said that in all the years that he grew up in New York City studying in school, that he had never, ever learned about slavery in New York. I was surprised by Harry's

response—the way he was reacting—because here was a man who was a number of years older than me, and a German American born, raised in New York City, and he wants me to read this description really for the sole purpose of enlisting my help in preserving the integrity of the burial ground. Harry says to me, "We have our first African American mayor [David Dinkins, 106th Mayor of New York City, 1990–93] and I think you should go and tell him about this site."

I was really struck by Harry's concern for the site. He gave me the environmental impact statement commissioned by the General Services Administration to then take back to my office for a closer review. He was the guy on my shoulder who would drop by every other day to find out whether I had spoken to someone or gotten word to our first African American mayor that the federal government was going to disturb a burial ground for enslaved people—land that the city once owned, and now, through friendly condemnation, had been given to the federal government for building on this site. Harry's perspective was that he felt nothing should be built on the site, that he thought it should be reserved for a place for reflection. He described a chapel or sanctuary where people could come and reflect on that history.

So after the lunch, I took that environmental impact statement back to my office and kept it and would go through it every now and then. Let's just say I did not rank high on the totem pole of personnel in the mayor's office such that I could just sort of walk into the mayor's office and say, "Hey, look, this is what's happening here. We need to do something about it."

Q: Can you describe what your role was at the mayor's office at the time?

Jorde: Yes. At the time that I was in the mayor's office, I was working in the Mayor's Office of Construction and my job was to oversee capital construction projects of all cultural institutions for the City of New York. If there was any kind of construction going on at these sites, whether it was the Metropolitan Museum of Art, an addition, or [MoMA] PS1, or the [New York] Aquarium, any of those places, my job was to make sure that they were progressing, coming in on time and within budget. And if there was a problem, my job was to help problem solve with the project team. But in addition to that, there were other projects including the first floating prison in New York—I've forgot even, which year that was, but I worked on that. There were some issues with the project so I was assigned to go down to New Orleans and deal with the ship building company president. Water treatment plants, various infrastructural projects throughout the city were also projects I was very much involved with.

Q: And so how—from my understanding, the environmental impact statement was prepared in 1989 but the public announcement [about the burial ground], I think, was 1991. So can you take me through your involvement in making this public, or your perspective on how it became public?

Jorde: Okay, well, that's the really interesting thing, and that's the little-known history, I would say, or little-known history surrounding the activism when we talk about preserving the African Burial Ground. Because oftentimes we hear about the activism by community members who were very instrumental in really pushing the needle and making sure that certain things got done. But as you know, in the City of New York, there are enumerable distractions, and when I say

distractions—you have a city that's filled with various communities with various concerns and various demands on the city. So while there may have been a blip or two about the fact that this site existed or that there was this history that people were hearing about, you didn't have a sudden groundswell of community members to show up and say hey, what's going on? Let's stop this. And that's something that I learned and was a part of my learning curve. Because though the historical significance was impressive to me, trying to get the attention or the kind of groundswell needed from the larger New York community, you really had to work strategically to do that.

So yes, the GSA [General Services Administration] environmental impact statement was produced in 1989, but it was not until 1991, when I had finally taken on new duties under Mayor Dinkins and settled into the Mayor's Office of Construction, that I took the concerns to various individuals and constituency offices within the mayor's administration who I felt could best handle the issues. For example, we used to have—and I don't know if today the mayor has these offices, but you had the Mayor's Office of African American and Caribbean Affairs or the Mayor's Office of Asian Affairs. So one of the first things I did was take this document to the Mayor's Office of African American and Caribbean Affairs. But at the time, these offices were being dissolved because of city cutbacks on funding. There was a downsizing within city government. People were losing their jobs, all kinds of cutbacks. So certain offices were being closed. And when I brought this topic to the Mayor's Office of African American and Caribbean Affairs, they said "We'd love to deal with it but we're in the process of closing down."

So advocating for the project came back to me. I was, however, able to exploit their office

resources—organizations and institutions. I was encouraged to follow up with a call the Schomburg [Center for Research in Black Culture] library and speak to Dr. Howard Dodson who was the director at the time. I had no idea who any of these people were. I'm not from New York. It was really not in my realm. I found myself calling people whom I'd never met, like Howard Dodson, having conversations on the phone about the significance of the site and next steps—however, it was something no one had quite tackled before. So as I continued outreach and started calling around and talking to various people in preservation and academia, Landmarks [Preservation Commission, LPC]—eventually I ended up speaking with the New York City Landmarks office. And through Landmarks, they were wonderful. They were an agency with whom I could rely upon as a resource and for guidance. They provided oversight and recommendations relating to preservation guidelines. They were instrumental in guiding me through the preservation process and helping me to understand the critical questions I should be asking. So I attached myself to Landmarks to learn more from them about processes, important question, and what was most concerning to them.

Landmarks was a pivotal resource for me, enabling me to navigate this unique development project from a much more informed position. When, after performing outreach to various city offices and organizations, and the project kept coming back to my desk, it was Urban Anthropologist, Daniel Pagano, and Director of Environmental Review Officer, Gina Santucci, with Landmarks who worked with me and kept me in the loop as to what was actually happening with the project site. And then there was a time when I had been in touch with Landmarks, and by this time, the old buildings had been taken down to make way for new construction. Backhoes were brought in and construction crews were digging at the site along with archaeologists hired

to begin testing to see whether there were any intact burials.

A pivotal moment for me, a moment which made this preservation project personal, was when Landmarks invited me to take a walking tour at the site. The site at that time was being controlled by the federal the United States General Services Administration. There was some archaeological testing that was permitted on the site because they needed to understand how much of the burial ground was intact if at all, and whether there were any cultural resources that could be retrieved per the environmental impact statement. So they excavated layer by layer.

I joined a group of city employees for a visit to the site under excavation. We were just a small group, and Landmarks took us out to the site. We were met by a gentleman who was one of the archaeologists, I don't recall who it was. But a question was raised—and I think I was the only African American in the group, and these may have been employees from Landmarks—and a question was asked, "So we understand that this was an African burial ground for enslaved people. What have you found or what can you tell us?" I had heard—a little birdie told me—that the federal government had issued a gag order to archaeologists not to have that conversation. Now granted, they weren't sure of anything, but when I heard that, I didn't really think about it until this woman asked the question. And when the archaeologist answered—again, I don't remember exactly what he said—but he clearly gave an answer that was intended to diminish significance. It was intended to, or at least perceived on my part, as a way of disappearing [scoffs] the people who may or may not be buried there. He was rendering invisible the lives and the meaning of these people. And these people were my people.

It was in that moment that I was outraged because I had, in 1988, lost my father to cancer. And remembering his sacrifices and those of others for justice. He was a highly revered civil rights attorney, and growing up during that time in southwest Georgia, and remembering all of the work and struggle on behalf of a people who had suffered countless injustices—not only in remembrance of my father but all of the people who put their lives and their health, everything, and their families on the line for the Civil Rights Movement—and in that moment it was as if the archaeologist was dismissing the lives of my father, and his colleagues, and everybody else who had done all of the hard work during the Civil Rights Movement. And I couldn't imagine erasing the existence of anybody who was Black who was buried there and who may have engaged in any form of resistance. And how is it that this one white individual could feel at ease attempting to erase this history in that moment. I'm really trying to impress upon you what that meant: it was enormous. It was just enormous. I can't say anything else about it. It was just unbelievable for me. I deeply impacted me in that moment.

As the ancestors would have it, as I put it, as we were walking away from the site, the presidential appointee, William [J.] Diamond, who was the head of the GSA, happened to be walking by the site and I turned and I don't know if there was an introduction by maybe the person who was giving the tour. And when I realized who William Diamond was, I approached him and I introduced myself and I gave him my business card from the mayor's office and he looked at the card and he asked, "Oh, are you interested in this project?" And I said, "Yes, I am." He invited me to come to their weekly project meetings. The initial plan for the project was to include City of New York offices, which later the City opted out of. Now, I had no official permission [laughs] to attend these meetings from my boss, Commissioner Rudolph Rinaldi in

the Mayor's Office of Construction, but I accepted Diamond's invitation and I would accompany Landmarks officers Daniel Pagano and Gina Santucci to the project meetings. And as I would participate in those meetings, I would gradually begin to understand the challenges and observe the progression of the project as archaeologists were reporting on their findings and how their findings could impact the project schedule and scope, particularly when they encountered a growing number of intact human remains.

Eventually at some point, I did share my interest in working on the federal project with my boss, Rudy Rinaldi. He had worked with what we used to call the Department of General Services for the City of New York and then he eventually came over to head up the Mayor's Office of Construction, and he also wore the hat as Buildings Commissioner. My responsibility working in the mayor's office included oversight of capital construction projects. Our mission supported construction in the city—it meant jobs and progress, so working on a project where my interests were not entirely aligned with those of the federal agency trying to erect a multimillion-dollar office building could be perceived as threatening to interfere with their agenda. This was a federal project. We're meant to be supportive. In fact, the mayor's office was slated to have office space within the building that was proposed or designed for the site.

The whole story of the African Burial Ground fight was even underway. There was this story of in-house advocacy within City Hall challenging the General Services Administration during project meetings going over what the questions ought to be—the questions that were put to the General Services Administration by the Landmarks Commission. My presence there in meetings, certainly combined with Landmarks, representing the mayor's office, meant you have weight in

terms of being able to push this in the right direction. So I did seek the support of the mayor's office to allow me to legitimately work on this project and serve as a conduit to effect change in how we regard sites important to African Americans. But it wasn't until, I would say—I'm really sorry, I don't remember how far along—but something had happened where Rudy Rinaldi was on a trip to Japan. It was mayor's office-related. New York City had a sister city in Japan. And on his way back, Rudy noted a photo and an article that appeared in a Japanese newspaper [about the burial ground]. And he's on the plane and he sees this press on the project, and he comes back to the office and lays the newspaper in front of me and says, "Okay, okay, you can work on this project. But just keep me informed about what this is about."

But I would say in terms of strategies for building a groundswell of community support, particularly as the General Services Administration moved forward with the project and we would sit in through meetings, there were some things that we felt were important for the community to be aware of—that sometimes the right trajectory of the project needed the support and push from a broader base of the community, broader than just those of us sitting in the conference room with the General Services Administration. The need for community engagement as a way of helping to steer this project along was critical to our work. So we seized opportunities to meet with a variety of people, elected officials like Senator David Paterson, initially confidentially, to share concerns and to say look, we think this is a very important project and we think that you have a community following who could be a benefit to the project and from his added leadership. I, along with individual employees with Landmarks, did quite a lot of work in building awareness with local leaders as a way of helping to build that groundswell needed to result in a national monument and historic district. So when I talk about

activism surrounding this project, there was a significant amount of groundwork laid owing to the activism by community on the inside of City Hall walls—I mean to say, there were jobs on the line in the name of the activism generated within the confines of city government. Recognizing this work requires the work of many voices, especially when you are in a city that has, as I mentioned earlier, a great deal of distractions.

Historic Preservation as a whole, for the Black community, has not necessarily—I'm not going to say for all—but has not been a big focus. There have been too many other demands that require the attention of our community, understandably, and preservation historically has been one that has not been as diverse or inclusive, I think. Historic Preservation just hasn't been a priority for the African American community, my community, in the way that is has for others. So there was quite a bit of strategic planning or strategic activism within city government to get other people and the broader community involved. You could talk to a couple of individuals but you really needed to reach out to elected representatives, or people who were heads of other institutions or organizations, to get them to rally the troops and get out and say to the broader community: this is important, we need to be looking at this.

I mean, there's much more this story and maybe we can get to it, but just to bring you to that point where behind the scenes, you're having conversations with people and you're looking at, okay, who can pull together a group of people and say okay, we're concerned. We want something to happen with this. We are watching. Because the initial little blips about the history of the site—you have people who are interested in historic preservation or who are doing a lot of genealogical research that would call and take interest. But it really did take some strategic

planning, or I'm saying some strategic activism, to really create that groundswell of community activism that we all recognize as a part of this project's history.

Q: Thanks for laying out that history there. I want to ask you a few follow-up questions from what you shared. The first is: can you recall what Landmarks shared with you as the questions that you need to be asking or concerned about or carrying forward? The lens that they shared with you about looking at it from a preservation perspective?

Jorde: Well, first and foremost, they were very good about and continued to stress the importance of broader community engagement or community input in the process, and how you do that. That was number one. The insistence of meaningful community engagement surrounding the African Burial Ground preservation was coordinated by key Black project consultants, which included me, Dr. Blakey, and Dr. Sherrill Wilson, and many other community stakeholders—this really set the bar for other projects, particularly for cultural heritage sites.

Another critical focus was the work plan and advocating for the archaeologists when they were retrieving information and resources from the initial test pits. Our concern was for making it possible and giving the archaeologists onsite whatever time was needed to do their best, and in terms of resources, to actually do whatever they needed to do to enable best ethical practices. Whether it was to sift through the soil, or time, to really understand what the resource was in place. Because this site presented an incredible opportunity to really speak to a history that was so little chronicled in the City of New York. This resource would precipitate revisiting school curricula and spark important conversations around slavery and its impact. So it was going to be

critical.

Having worked in an office for construction with sights set for getting that building up, getting that project done within budget and on time, I understood that we were working with a likeminded agency, the General Services Administration. For GSA it was a matter of: we're ticking that box, we got the archaeologist on site, but we're going to give them a limited threshold of time. We're going to give them only this minimal window of time to work. It was not about the significance of the site and the descendant community. And so Landmarks' Pagano and Santucci were really thorough about apprising me of when particular circumstances would need focus and a change of course that may call for archaeologists to adopt a protocol or need to be permitted to extend time in the field to handle the resource properly. So whatever questions, whatever the framework was for archaeologists to be able to do what was needed. It was enlightening for me and a tool I would use for future projects, to the extent that I could be that voice helping to steer the project and meeting in a much-needed direction.

Having the right people on an archaeological site—I mean the right person with the right skills as well as professionals in leadership from the African American descendant community—was critical. The African Burial Ground Project set a new standard where it concerned Black leadership in the field and across all fields. And again, this goes back to meaningful community engagement and public commentary. They talked about just even the review process of Landmarks, what laws kick in to protect what. That was important. So I think that the role that I really played, again, coming from the mayor's office, was being able to sit with Landmarks. And Landmarks is strongly recommending that wherever they would or could enforce the laws that

were put in place, they would. Again, I was there to support moving through those processes in the way that they would be advantageous to protecting whatever resources and whatever story we could tell.

Now one of the biggest challenges, I thought, which really came to light was that there was a team of archaeologists on site tied to Lehman College. There was an archaeologist, Ed [Edward] Rutsch, and you'll have to forgive me for not remembering the connections of how these teams ended up working. But it had come to my attention that the *New York Times* did an interview and quoted one of the archaeologists. There was a reference that was made by an archaeologist, this whole description of burying by night and the drumming—he made some tie-in to jazz, African people and jazz. In other words, within the African American historical community, it was an irresponsible remark. It was one that lacked insight. So as I started to hear more and more from folks, historians, or people reacting to these kinds of comments.

Or, there was another occasion where, further down the line in the project, when an individual's remains were excavated, they found that there were British naval buttons in the coffin with this individual and this person had been clothed in a British naval coat. And one of the remarks—I don't know whether this was given in an interview or not, but one of the remarks was, "Oh, we don't know whether someone gave this poor individual a coat. Maybe it was cold and they were given this coat to keep warm. Who knows? Maybe they stole it." And then to hear an African American historian say, "No. The Brits offered freedom if enslaved people or African people fought for them." So that was not at the forefront. That wasn't the first thought. The first thought was that somebody was benevolent enough to give the coat to this Black man! So it really

became evident that there needed to be Black leadership and Black professionals involved in interpreting this site and interpreting what was being uncovered.

And so when you ask me, what are some of the things that Landmarks was talking about, there wasn't a lot of emphasis on that. But certainly, when you talk about who is capable of interpreting history, or evidence as tangible reminders of this history, who is best suited to do this? It became increasingly clear that there was a lack of Black leadership, professional leadership, in the area of interpreting this history. And that became, for me, paramount for the project. So much so that in one of the meetings with the General Services Administration, one of the regular project meetings, I raised the question after there was a presentation. There was a regular project meeting presentation by the archaeologists who were working on the project, and this gentleman, I think it was Ed Rutsch who had given an update on what was happening. I raised the question, "Well, what about African American professionals? Are there African American archaeologists on your team? Who's helping to interpret this?" And the response, again, to me was, "Well, Peggy, what happens is that archaeology is an interpretive science." And this is Ed Rutsch explaining this to me. "It's an interpretive science. And so we may dig and we'll interpret the history. And then, in our realm, we'll have colleagues who may then come back and they may challenge our interpretation. And they may write another interpretation. These interpretations get revisited often. So within our discipline, this is what happens."

I took exception to it and said, "I don't think that that works because you (aka hegemonic historic narratives) have always been in a position to interpret our history. And here we have an opportunity to include other people who can more authentically interpret this history, because the

problem with doing it your way now is that you're going to interpret it. The federal government is going to use public dollars—our dollars—for you to interpret it your way. And then they're going to print up your interpretation and put it in a beautiful glossy folder, and then they're going to take those glossy folders and walk that into that federal building, which is, again, paid for by the people. They're going to put a 'Take One' holder and mount it on the wall and put those glossy folders in there, and everybody is going to believe that that's the word of God because the federal government paid you to tell everybody a story." And I said, "We've already had that done before. So now we need to do it differently. And it seems to me we need to have the people on the team that can help tell this story in a new way." Right? "And in an enlightened way."

At that moment, Bill Diamond, who was kind of sitting at the head of the conference table, he just kind of looked to the left and looked to the right and he said, "Why don't we have any Black archaeologists? Can't we get some Black archaeologists on the team?" And there wasn't really quite a response; people might have said they had spoken to a couple people. But I then volunteered and I said, "Well, if you don't know who they are, I will help find who they are." I set off from that meeting making phone calls, calling people. I had no idea! I didn't know who was in the field.

So it was, again, me calling the Schomburg Center, speaking to Landmarks, and getting a number from this one to call another person. And I was calling around the country, just speaking to various Black professionals, learning that someone might be in one discipline so it didn't necessarily apply to this project, but maybe you should speak to this one. I mean, it was a huge learning curve for me, actually making the calls and finding out who's who, and then coming

back and making recommendations and saying, well, here's some names that I found out. Some of these guys—because the field of archaeology and anthropology, particularly for African Americans, it's very small, it's very intimate—and a lot of these guys know each other. Even outside of the group of Black archaeologists, white archaeologists know some of these Black archaeologists. So this buzz— you've got other Black archaeologists talking to other Black archaeologists about this project. With time, there was a whole transition when Dr. [Michael] Blakey is brought in as a name, someone that ought to be considered on the team. And he, of course, brought in a number of other people.

But in terms of to your question, Landmarks and the impact that they had in terms of the questions that they raised, for me, what was most enlightening was this whole piece of the archaeologists and what they're permitted to do. What is their accelerated forms of archaeology? And GSA was adopting—they brought in a specialist who was apparently the guy on accelerating archaeology. In other words, how we do it quickly? We dig it up real quick! And then we do this other method. Being sort of cautioned that, while it is a recognized method, it is not the method that you really want for this project. So dealing with that, that was very, very helpful, I thought, in the very early stages particularly.

Q: Thank you for clarifying that. And also, even though I asked about Landmarks, I also want to uplift what you brought to it too, which is saying it isn't just anyone who can go in and assess what these resources are and mean. You can't just go in and say, well, to be consistent with this science, we have to go in and interpret incorrectly first.

Jorde: [Laughs] Right. Yes.

Q: So I want to ask about—moving through time a bit here and then we'll come back—but there's a lot of people who are reporting what it's like to raise points like this now, in spaces like museums and archives, cultural institutions. They're reporting that it's still difficult. There's not an acceptance of people bringing their own experiences, saying look, I've lived this life, I know the history, and I'm telling you this is wrong. So what I want to ask you is, knowing that it's so hard for people of color, for Black people, disabled people, and so on, to speak up about these things today, what was it like for you at the time to raise these points?

Jorde: I mean, let's see [pauses]. It was liberating. And it was a turning point for me, because what was happening was a lot of things were converging. Here on one track, I go back to working on projects where they have a timeline, a deadline, milestones, goals, getting a project up. It means jobs for people, et cetera. I even got into a debate when someone said—I met a guy who was a contractor, an African American contractor, and he said, I really support what you're saying but this is my job. I've got a contact with this project and I want to get this project done! [Laughs] I want to do it. So for me, having these conversations, it was really pivotal for where my career was sort of going. And having these conversations with various people, even people in the mayor's office, saying hey, you can't be on the side of stopping a federal building. You know that, right? You can't do that. I'm like, what do you mean? What are you talking about?

So in conversations that I had, I was having conversations with Black contractors who had a contract and who said, this is my livelihood. I'd love to support this [non-accelerated excavation

of the burial site] but what does that mean to our community? I've got a job now. I've got money coming in. Then, you had my office alone. And the conversation that I started to have was really about, well, why can't we have both? Why aren't we talking about this in the context of it could be either/or but, even if you wanted to say, okay, the building has to go up, why can't we have a building that's designed to be responsive to the site that it's going to be built on? I mean, wouldn't a designer love that as an opportunity to kind of help define your building? I mean, really make it very different from any other building? This should be a gift [laughs] for any designer, any architect, any developer. This should be a gift.

So for me it was deeply personal because, as far as I was concerned, I came from so much personal history, experiences in history, in the Civil Rights Movement that was so pivotal to this country, and here was this other piece. I'll back it up that I did an interview for *Harvard Magazine* and the guy who came in to interview me, we started out talking. He was asking where are you from. I started talking about where I was from and I started sharing all this family history. And he was struck by it. He just started delving into all of this family history, that my grandfather had gone to Fisk University, and to work his way through college, he was part of the buggy team. They were a team of young Black—this was at a Black college—but young men who were assigned to drive Booker T. Washington around. They were his horse and buggy team. It was just sort of like having a student drive the president of the university around. And my grandmother, having gone to Tuskegee [University], and then having her little signature book at the end of her college years, and then a little note written by George Washington Carver, things like that. So growing up and seeing those things, I have those things. I have those things, the little note, the poem written by George Washington Carver to my grandmother. I mean, it is

amazing. So I grew up with that history. And then fast forward, I'm in New York, and this history's there. I'm like okay, well, it was deeply personal. How do we preserve this? And how we preserve it not just for me, but it's part of New York history. If you ask what it was to me, it was my history, my community. Why is it that we can't figure out a way to really celebrate this? Certainly, it was exciting for me.

And I will say, as an aside, as the project moved forward, I would in the summers would travel abroad. My husband is from Germany. He's from a little town in Germany called Monchengladbach, it's a little suburb to Dusseldorf. And when we would go, I started making appointments to meet with—every time we traveled—to meet with people. I also had family in London. And to find out how the city of London, how other cities dealt with historic sites and cultural resources when they were set up for development. Did the building not get built? If it did get built, how was the resource treated? How was it handled? And often times, in other cities, cities that were older than New York, you have cities that are taking buildings, and of course, maybe they're redesigning the building, building up. The building starts three floors higher and on ground, now, maybe you've got a whole cultural or an interpretive center or museum that is on the ground level protecting the resource.

So I looked at examples of that in various cities and met with museum directors just to kind of understand what their processes were, what the perception was of the community, the larger community as it relates to development and the protection of cultural resources. And that was on my dime. And then I could come back and sit in meetings and talk to just our—meaning, the City of New York—folks as well as talking to GSA about what are the possibilities. I raised the

possibility—I think in that building there were meant to be two or three levels of parking below grade, and I talked about, well, what if we don't do that? What if we dedicate one of those levels to an interpretive center or something on grade? Of course, that was something that wasn't going to be a consideration but it was part of the conversation. I even spoke to the designing architect to talk about what their perceptions were. Would they even consider or see ways in which the building could be responsive to the site? Of course, it wasn't met with any kind of great reception but it was a conversation that was had and that I believe should have been had. Even today, it should be a conversation that's had before, during the "talkitecture" stage [laughs], instead of the architecture stage.

So yes, it was deeply meaningful to me. It was meaningful and it was exciting as well, in getting people to think, or trying to think differently about how it is that we respond to the protection of cultural resources and development.

Q: I also want to acknowledge how difficult it can be to channel rage and frustration into the kind of attitude that you outlined with: why can't we have both? Both isn't radical. It's a compromise. But just the energy that it takes to funnel that into workable suggestions. I just wanted to commend you for that, which is hard in many different contexts, including ones that you're outlining here. When you're looking back at American history, no one can question the history. You literally have it. Not that you need these items, artifacts from your own family, but you do.

Jorde: I want to say something before I forget, something that you just said in terms of—and I'm

glad that you pointed it out when you said why can't you have both, it being a compromise. And I would go back to say the moment—and it's hard to put it into words. The moment that I heard that archaeologists try to erase this history, that was where my outrage was. Then, when I talk about why can't you have both, there are two ways in which I think about this. I think that there probably should have been a time where they just said, there's no policy in place that protects African American resources in the same way that, say, Native American burial sites, where if the United States government encounters a burial site for Native Americans, the switch gets turned off. The lights get turned out, people walk away. And that's the treatment. You will not build there.

So yes, there can be some outrage about what the U.S. government has the ability to do, and did they do it here? No, they didn't. So yes, there is. But at the same time, and maybe it is compromise, but I kind of think of it as if you're coming to the table with millions of dollars, you've got money in your pocket, I'm willing to talk. [Laughs] I'm willing to say some of that money needs to be done and dedicated in the right way to preserve this site. Maybe you can have the next twenty floors above, whatever, but whatever happens on this ground, you need to take some of that money and dedicate it to doing the right thing for honoring these people or this resource or this community.

So I kind of think of it, I guess, in some ways, I think of it that way because usually, the next conversation, if you walk away, it's like well, how do we celebrate the site? Well, we have no money for <u>that</u>. I'm like, okay, but you've got money for it now. So let's talk about that. How much are we going to dedicate to do the right thing? So for me, why don't we do both? I'm

spending that money that you thought was all going to be about that building. Right?

Q: Yes, absolutely. I think compromise doesn't feel like the right word to me either, but maybe we'll figure out—agency feels like a little bit more appropriate word. There's something about having the opportunity to take agency and maybe be heard and claim what should be yours, what should be the city's, the nation's, and so on and so forth.

So I want to go back to where you mentioned Michael Blakey, and bringing on, searching for Black archaeologists, cultural anthropologists, people who would be able to be involved in the leadership of this project. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about some of the people that you connected with and brought into the project, including some of the people that you mentioned as folks that you reached out to, to build a groundswell within the city. So not just the experts from a scholarly perspective but people with power in their own agency to get that collation going.

Jorde: Right. Well, Dr. Blakey, I think we had spoken by phone as well and he had received apparently some calls from other folks. There was Dr. Blakey, there was Dr. Sherrill Wilson, who ultimately went on to the project. Once the project was underway, GSA hired me as a key consultant. Dr. Sherrill Wilson, I had her name through—oh, what was her name, Joan Maynard, who headed up the Weeksville Society [Society for the Preservation of Weeksville & Bedford-Stuyvesant History, now Weeksville Heritage Center]. She was one of the folks who really protected and worked on protecting that site out in Brooklyn. So Joan Maynard had given me Sherrill Wilson's name.

I even, interestingly enough—side note—took a walking tour that Dr. Sherrill Wilson would give of Black history in New York, downtown, and went with someone from Landmarks and we just kind of wanted to put the whole site into perspective. And it was on that weekend that we were around the site, and the United States General Services Administration was not supposed to be digging in a particular area, and we just happened to stop and take a look and discovered that they were digging in an area that they should not have been digging. And we shot a picture—and this is again part of that activism—and we sent that picture to the *New York Times*. Then that hit the *New York Times*, it halted what was not supposed to be happening, and then that also helped with the groundswell of attention that work was being done and not in the right spot, and really pushing back on this agency that was trying to move and accelerate the project.

So there was Dr. Sherrill Wilson and then Howard Dodson. And I'll say this about Howard, I did not know Howard Dodson at the time. I had just spoken to him several times on the phone. But eventually, after there had been an impact to this area of the ground that should not have been impacted, construction was halted. There was a big press conference and that was when I had been called in because I had been apprising the mayor's office and just sending regular memos updating what was happening on the site, that the mayor's office should be focusing in on this because of the proximity, and because it was land that had been owned by the city. After the mayor was being questioned about the site and I was named his special advisor, and I fielded some of the press questions, there was then a need to put together a blue ribbon committee of people to advise the mayor. So I helped to pull together the blue ribbon committee (at the request of Deputy Mayor Barbara Fife), which was headed up by Howard Dodson.

There was an initial committee that I pulled together under my boss, Commissioner Rudy Rinaldi, who directed me to form a working committee that I called in my office, which included Senator David Paterson's assistant, Gina Stahlnecker. There were various board members from either historic preservation or the National Organization of Minority Architects, things like that, minority architects. Various people within the mayor's office who could help advise just about the site or make recommendations about how the project should proceed, or at least advise the mayor on things that he should be concerned with.

Ultimately, that little start of a committee transitioned into a larger blue ribbon committee, which was headed up by Howard Dodson. And, forgive me, it escapes me how many were in that group but there were various elected officials, the borough president, various folks, Weeksville, and other historians who were part of that committee. And I, in fact, was on maternity leave, because I was pregnant during a lot of this stuff with my first child, and I was out on maternity leave when Deputy Mayor Barbara Fife called me. I had actually provided Barbara Fife with a lot of the information, in addition to the mayor directly. So during my maternity leave, she called me to come into the first blue ribbon meeting, and I told her that I didn't have a babysitter. And she said, "That's okay. I'll hold the baby." And she did. I brought the baby in, and we met for the first time with the mayor and then the rest of the blue ribbon committee and I served as an advisor for that committee.

The people that I pulled in were various people from the City Council, throughout, making pronouncements that they would support and somehow pull their folks together. It's just been so

long. I don't remember everyone's names that I reached out to but it did include so many elected officials throughout City Hall. Ruth Messinger and her office, very, very helpful.

Q: And can you talk about how—this is a broad question—but once that committee was formed, how did things start to move? I know we're looking at a long period of time, ten years maybe, but if we can think about maybe the first few years, '91-'93 or so, where there's designations. There's protests.

Jorde: Yes, there are all of those things. In terms of trying to set that in order, you had the blue ribbon committee. Prior to that, I did organize a site visit for the mayor for the first time to actually see what was going on, on the site. Actually, before that blue ribbon committee, you had a protest that was onsite. This was probably through some of the Mayor's Office of African American and Caribbean Affairs that hadn't completely disbanded, so you had some outreach out in Brooklyn. You had Sonny Carson, who had gotten a group of students together. And meanwhile, I was working within City Hall and getting other elected officials supporting the project. And I had officially been, I guess, named at that point the mayor's special advisor on the project. This is after the *New York Times* article appeared and slowed the project down. I guess this would have been in '92 that you had Sonny Carson come out.

This was a big deal, where I got a call that Sonny Carson had a group of students to come out and literally lay down in front of backhoes to stop them from continuing to dig. And so we stopped. I had to come out and meet with GSA, the students (protesters), and we also had someone from the Mayor's Office of African American and Caribbean Affairs to come, Dr.

Abd'Allah Adesanya, who was, I think, the interim director or assistant director of the office at the time. And he came out and we met with Sonny Carson and [Cecil] Elombe Brath. But working through that and having regular meetings—ultimately, that sort of also precipitated regular GSA meetings with the community, which initially was in a very small conference room.

You had activism on the part of Black architects that were part of a little group [New York Coalition of Minority Architects, and others who were not affiliated with that group] that, somehow had gotten a copy of the plans of the building and designs. Preliminary designs were made. William [E.] Davis [Jr.], Bill Davis, who was also a Commissioner on Landmarks. Also Herman Howard, who was another architect. But a group of Black architects got together and came up with a design, and at one of the community meetings with GSA, one of the monthly meetings, presented this plan because GSA was saying oh, we can't do anything in the building. There's no opportunity to do anything. And so these architects came up with two schemes to present to the community meeting, with boards, a full presentation showing where an interpretive center actually could be in two different areas. Two different schemes on the ground floor, one along Broadway and one along one of the other side streets. So that must have been, I guess it was somewhere in '92-'93.

We were also simultaneously working as well on getting state recognition or state preservation—and the site being preserved and protected, federally and city, so that the federal government and anybody else who was proposing to do any kind of development in the area, it would restrict it, and certainly require anyone doing work, even just repair work, to go through a process that was reflective of the sensitivity of the site. And therefore, ultimately, five New York City blocks

were protected. So there was an effort to do that.

And then, again, I can't tell you which year, but the pivotal moment was when [Augustus] "Gus" Savage, the Congressman, Representative Gus Savage, held a hearing in Washington to hear about the significance of the site and all of the information surrounding what GSA had done, in terms of desecration of the site, how GSA had proceeded. And it was in that hearing that Gus Savage laid the hammer down to say: stop construction, and there has to be, now, a memorial plan that needs to be put together, which is then what kicked the project into a totally different gear. So now you disband the blue ribbon committee and now there's a call for a federal steering committee to be put together. Howard Dodson has been given the opportunity to head that. Basically, the blue ribbon committee turns into the federal steering committee, plus added folks. Some community people, and other members of GSA and other government agencies were added to that. So now the project gets kicked into another gear. It means it's no longer going to be a situation where you have GSA and city government but now there's this formal federal body that makes recommendations, which meant now that my job was going to have to change.

I went to Howard Dodson and my boss to say I really would like to continue to follow the project. So when the federal steering committee was put into place, Landmarks was part of that federal steering committee. Laurie Beckelman represented Landmarks and a host of other federal and city, agencies, and representatives. I went on then to serve as the executive director to coordinate the meetings of the federal steering committee. And then out of that committee, put together their recommendations to Congress for a memorial plan. And that lasted about a year before the recommendations had to be put in. That was in August of—I don't know if that was

’92. [Laughs] I don’t know.

Q: I’m not sure either.

Jorde: I have the book and I’ll have to look at it [1993]. I can’t remember when those recommendations went in. They went into Congress and then Congress would, based upon the budget of the project, that’s how they mapped out what would get done of those recommendations.

Q: I wanted to ask if there were any of those official preservation designations and protections that felt particularly meaningful to you personally or, alternately, meaningful as the director of the project.

Jorde: As a director of the memorialization, yes, certainly. It was unbelievable to me that we were able to get a historic district [African Burial Grounds and the Commons Historic District]. That was what was most significant to me, that we actually were able to preserve an area including about five New York City blocks. There are a number of people today who really don’t know when they’re walking in that area where they’re really walking. But to see that on paper, to see the boundary of the historic district, and to understand several parts of the area included where people were hanged and burned at the stake, people were buried. Just all of these various things that impacted the lives of enslaved and free African people. I mean there were other histories that were there too but that was most significant.

And what comes to mind, it's interesting. We talked about conversations, and how it's impacted me, and I'm sure other people. Within this historic district, there is what's recognized as Foley Square Park, and Foley Square Park is in front of the Supreme Court Building. Just in that area, there was a pond called Collect Pond, which the burial ground was sort of around. So as a part of this larger project, you had 290 Broadway and then you had the new courthouse building, which was considered Five Points, historically, closer to Chinatown. So all of these projects were going on at the same time and I was sitting on the art and architecture panel for both of those buildings, the [Daniel Patrick Moynihan U.S.] Courthouse building at Five Points and the 290 Broadway building. Kitty Carlisle Hart was the chair of that group, and we would review artwork for celebrating the site.

And, similarly to the Percent for Art program with the City of New York, where a certain percentage of the construction costs goes towards public art being incorporated in the building, the artists for the 290 Broadway project and the courthouse project were chosen with the idea that they would, at least within the 290 Broadway project, be doing work that was responsive to the history. They didn't have to but it was something that we asked them to consider. So sitting in and representing the mayor, sitting in for that process—then as artists developed works and would come back, and the way in which you asked questions. There was a whole process. You don't say, well, I don't like this. Why don't we move that little thing that you've done to the left and do it this way? You're not permitted to do that with the artist. [Laughs] You're simply there to listen, ask questions, and hope that they're going to go down a road that you think is going to come out with a wonderful work and enhance the building and really speak to the significance of the ground.

So having gone through that process, when the Foley Square Park project came up in the midst of all of this—a totally different project—I was asked to work with that project as well because it was within the historic district. An African American artist, Lorenzo Pace, was chosen to do a work in the park. And there had been a conversation about doing work that spoke to the significance of the African Burial Ground but there were these other histories that some people thought were important to New York history. Even with all the other history, what came to mind is, you start to think there are lots of layers of history but making a decision about what you're really going to speak to. You can call it that you prioritize the history, what history is a little bit more important than the other history, and that's an interesting question that came up. But one that I was very clear on, and I think that the larger community was very clear on, but it wasn't very clear to New York City Parks. [Laughs] And that was under the leadership of [pauses]—oh well, anyways.

So what happens is that you have this artist who comes to the table and he's recommended, he's been chosen. And in one of the first meetings that I had, I was invited to come out to Parks to take a look at a mockette of what was being proposed. And there had been quite a lot of conversation about one of the reasons why this artist, Lorenzo Pace, was chosen: because there was some level of confidence that he was going to be responsive to the history of the site. And when I was invited just to a preliminary meeting to come out, because I was representing the mayor, to sit and see what was being proposed, the work that I saw before me just did not look as if it was really completely responsive to the site. It puzzled me. I was kind of confused.

So when it was presented, the first proposal was sort of like some stone panels in a circle, etched on each panel different histories, highlighting different histories of the site. Kind of like a Stonehenge thing. Of course, having had this experience with Percent for Art and with the art and architecture [panels], I really felt like okay, now I have to be very careful about how I ask about this work! Because I was really surprised. I was surprised because I had thought that, in my view, it was kind of watered down. I thought all of these histories, suddenly it was very democratic. These histories had equal weight.

So the artist wasn't talking very much. Parks was doing all the talking. So I tried to be very diplomatic to say okay, interesting, and then I wanted to hear from the artist. And when the artist started expressing himself, I don't remember verbatim, but it became clear to me that it didn't seem that this was coming from the artist. It was perhaps that the artist was feeling—because you also had an issue where there were a lot of Black artists that didn't get the same kind of commissions—but this artist didn't seem convinced, to me, by the work. It was just the way he talked about it and the way he presented it. So again, I just asked questions, and then it became very clear that what was being presented to me—and again, I'm thinking back on this—but it became clear by way of the artist that this was something that the sponsoring agency wanted. And not necessarily what the artist wanted. So then I had to speak to that.

It was very unsettling. I mean, it was unsettling on both sides. It was unsettling to be the person to sit to tell a city agency, "Step back, give this artist space and let them do what we were supposed to allow them to do." Because I learned that this is what they do on these other panels. So because I challenged Parks, the artist was given an opportunity to go back and revisit the

design in the way that he felt that he wanted to express it. And that design stands in the park today, which is *Triumph of the Human Spirit* by Lorenzo Pace, an abstraction of a headpiece of an African headdress that he felt was very powerful and put together.

And then, even after that design was put into place, it was challenged by the Commissioner of Parks [Henry J. Stern] at the time. This was no secret. It was within the art community. Word was getting back to me that the commissioner was challenging the worthiness of it as an art piece, which was outrageous! And if I represent the mayor and I'm sitting on a panel, a federal art panel and a city art panel, and I'm being told, "You don't challenge the art. You don't tell the artist what to do." How is it that it's okay for a commissioner to go to art specialists throughout the City of New York to question? Because this artist was hearing from his peers! He was hearing from his peers that his work was being challenged. And the fact that this was an African American was outrageous to me because how often was that happening with everybody else, anybody who was <u>not</u> African American?

It got to a point where we actually ended up having to have a meeting in the art commission conference room with the commissioner, with a number of other artists, and the artist in the room and having a conversation. I will just tell you: the fact that we even had to sit and have a meeting to give voice to a commissioner challenging a process that applied to all artists—but this one suddenly was being treated differently—for me, it became about race. Why was it that this person—and I know that the commissioner often was given a pass because of his "unique personality." That to me was unacceptable and that's what everybody was used to, his unique personality. And the fact that we were actually entertaining the conversation in City Hall, in the

art commission, was, I felt, outrageous.

And I found myself, in that meeting, as we were initially politely going around the room and listening to this individual talk about the work, question the shape of it. “It looks like a woman’s shoe. And if it’s a woman’s shoe, I’d be okay with it if you’d just told me it was a woman’s shoe,” because that’s what it looked like to that individual. That is outrageous, right? That’s outrageous! I could not take it any longer and I slammed my fist down on the table and I will say, through tears, I said, “You know what? This is not about you. This is about my community. This is about my history. That’s what this is about.” But the fact that a meeting had to go there—and it cut off the conversation, of entertaining any further the absurd conversation that was being had regarding the commissioning of a Black artist that had been commissioned to really speak to the history of this site.

So the stories that I have are mostly stories, little battles that are big battles like that. When you talk about race, and you talk about deference given to certain people versus other people, and not everybody playing by the rules. So those were my battles. Yes, it was Commissioner Stern, I think, at that time.

Q: To me, it sounds like at the very least, what a waste of time. At the most, violence against a community whose history is finally being recognized, in a way. At every turn, you had to have an eye out for how is this process going to be different for my community, and then to use your skills as a manager of projects to get things on track. From what you said, it sounds like a pretty relentless stream of those kinds of things.

Jorde: Yes, it was, it was. I mean, really important and pivotal and vital conversations or debates and challenges that had to be overcome relative to that. You could never had told me that that would happen. I will say, after it was over, the gentleman who was sort of chairing the committee, we embraced and he whispered to me, "Only you could have said what was said." I realized I've never forgotten that. And it's true. And the reason why it has stuck with me is that there were lots of battles like that, and those conversations—what I said in that moment, in stopping the entertainment of any more of that violence, as you said—is what has to happen on that level. You have to put out those—it's not insignificant. You're going to have to put out that kind of violence, you're going to have to confront that kind of violence, because this is a person in leadership who is speaking like this. This is a person in leadership who is taking his power and his influence and picking up the phone and calling people at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and calling people in the art world, trying to diminish what this individual was commissioned to do because he's uncomfortable with it. Ok?! So you have to have people like me shut it down.

The burial ground project had a number of those kinds of moments. So, again, I go back to that little-chronicled activism that happens behind closed doors, in that board room or in those offices, when you're challenging. Whether you're challenging the archaeologists to say no, it's not enough that you get to interpret it your way and then we have to come behind and reinterpret it. Or that somebody can say, "I don't like the way that looks." And, "I think that the history of the shot tower"—New York City, in that same area where the burial ground was, they had the first shot tower, where they made lead shot—"that's equally important as the death of these enslaved and free African people." I'm sorry, I don't get that. What are you talking about? Why

is that on par? And that's what was being fought. "No, we need to share that history," to the point where I did say at one point, "Look, no one would have a question if this were a Holocaust site and you had the lead shot tower. What history are you going to—think—what are you going to prioritize? It's no different here." But the fact that I would have to go there to even have that as an example, to make people understand that, to actually get it, it's outrageous. It's outrageous.

And I will tell you again, just as an aside, also as a part of going to cities, visiting cities abroad, much older than New York City, and learning how it is that they handle those sites—as I mentioned earlier, my husband is German. He's not German American. He's from Germany. He holds a German passport. And whenever we would go to Germany, I would always say, "I want to visit a Site of Conscience. I want to visit a Holocaust site. I want to see how this kind of history is being remembered and what is being used to remind people of something that we should never revisit." And so, as a rule, I've visited many of these sites to see how what I consider moving and effective, in terms of really getting people to understand what happened, and why it's so important to remember.

Anyway, yes, those conversations, those fights are the ones that stand out for me. And again, they're not chronicled because they were—those were the things that you didn't necessarily talk about after you walked out of the room because those were commissioners in place. Those were people—their jobs were there. Look, I wasn't a commissioner. But those are important stories for people to understand, that people kind of think are just [happening] out on the street. But it's the people in power that you're shoulder to shoulder with that you're having to challenge and say, look, no, you're wrong. You've got to get it together. You're wrong. And changing those minds

can be tough. It's a tough battle. There's a lot of stuff.

Q: Where did you go or who do you look to for support during this time? Or release?

Jorde: [Laughs] Release? My husband!

Literally, again, some of the folks—Daniel Pagano in Landmarks, who's still there. I'm guarded about Daniel because he's still there. And Gina Santucci, who's also still with Landmarks. They are very thoughtful. Our friendship was built on this project. And even the projects that I work on today, I always reach out to them. Before the pandemic, we would try and get together for lunch, just to kind of really talk and regroup about what the right thing is and what should be doing. They are thoughtful and they were really just incredible resources for me. And a lot of the support that I got actually was outside. They were my friends. Because a lot of my friends, some of them are from the South. They get it, they know it. So those are the people I looked to. And I was always afraid that I had stepped in it and I was going to lose my job! [laughs] But I would come back and still nothing happened and I could keep going. I could keep going.

Q: What has the site itself come to mean to you today?

Jorde: Oh, the site has been—it's my home base. That site, everything I went through, in terms of wearing all the very various hats in all these various roles with the project, I always go back to base. All of those experiences have formed what I do now. And my experiences growing up in the South informed how I felt about the site. But that project has been my resource.

And for a bit of time, because it was very controversial, my contract was—when I was wearing my hat as the Director of Memorialization for the interpretative center, putting together the design competition for the interpretative center, the memorial, and then laying the groundwork for the reburial of the remains that were sent to Howard University for research under Dr. Michael Blakey—even having my contract abbreviated, it was meant to go on until a memorial went up, and then after four years, the project got fraught with a whole lot of politics and a host of other things. But I kind of had to go through a little bit of withdrawal because I was so consumed by that project and what it meant and what it could mean to other communities. Because throughout that project, even in the early stages, I would get phone calls from people from <u>everywhere</u>, particularly in New York, but people from every faith, every culture would call to say what they thought needed to happen. "In our culture, nothing should be built"—everybody would share through the lens of their culture. And I thought it was really powerful because people felt compelled to speak to that. It was really powerful.

I was pregnant at the time. I would walk by the project. If I was going on when they were excavating, I remember a Chinese woman stopping me, and she says, "No, you shouldn't go on site because you're pregnant." There's this whole spiritual thing about being pregnant and being on a burial ground. Will your child be inhabited by bad spirits? But everybody brought their culture right to the table, right to that site. But the site, there's just a million stories that that project has—I mean after that hiatus of many years, and then finally raising my kids, and then sporadically talking to people, doing a couple of interviews about the project and the significance of the project, I'm finding myself back into this project again, after such a long time. And I find

that it still informs me. It still has that power and, I believe, the power of the ancestors, who are still saying more work needs to be done.

Even as recently as, I guess it was 2018—and actually it may have been late 2017—two British filmmakers started emailing me because of a burial ground that they had become aware of on the island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic that they saw some similarities with the New York African Burial Ground and how it was not being treated in the way that it should be treated. So for over the course of a year, they wrote me and would give me updates and would ask me questions. I would write long emails back to them, everything that I knew from the African Burial Ground, and sharing with them, until finally, after a year, I said I need to come over and see what's going on because I basically emptied everything I had learned and shared it with them. They agreed. I said, I'm a descendant of enslaved people. This is what I think. I need to sort of see what's going on. And they sponsored a trip, brought me in, and I met with the governor of the island. There was a meeting with a community group that had been put together, sort of figuring out how to treat the ground. But then there were other interests involved. There was some development that was going to be happening. A new airport had been put in and unearthed 325 remains. There was very limited public engagement, not in the way that the New York City burial ground had done. That was huge. In terms of public engagement, the African Burial Ground in New York City set the bar when it came to public engagement. The federal steering committee met every month. The public was invited. We had a section in their meetings where the public could always speak. We had transcripts of all the meetings, all of that.

So yes, the project just has continued to be a resource for me and for projects that I'm working

on here in the city, and one in Georgia as well, in addition to advocating for the protection of the ground in St. Helena. I flew over on my own dime to meet with two members of Parliament, Diane Abbott and David Lammy, to bend their ears to say, look, we've done this before. You guys need to help do this, and to sit with them and talk about what it is that could be done, if at all, talking to their community, going to St. Helena and spending a week in St. Helena and talking about that history and how important it is. And in some ways, it was a little bit different. There were a number of different pieces to that, which was great. There was a lot to learn. Because the community, though they are descendants enslaved people, they more readily identified with being descendants of European heritage—there was quite a mixture. So for a period of time, there were Asian people who were on island—I think that they were indentured servants, and Indian people, various other folks, British.

So they're very proud of this mixture but the fact that there is a cemetery unmarked, uncelebrated, and filled with more than 8,000 enslaved people, who are lying there. And then you have the tomb—because in St. Helena, people know that that's where Napoleon was exiled and he died there. His tomb is there, beautifully decorated. His body has been gone for two hundred years, almost, or just under that. And yet, there is no real recognition of the African burial ground there. So they're going through a lot of the same things that New York went through, in terms of having to deal with government and getting them to look at this and see this differently. We're still in that phase. They don't necessarily see it the same way.

Q: Yes, on one hand, it's great that the project is still relevant, and also frustrating that it's still relevant. There's still this kind of double standard that happens with regard to whose life and

death are respected and protected.

Jorde: Yes, absolutely, absolutely, absolutely.

Q: I think we're coming to the end of our time. We did go over a little bit. Thank you so much for all that you've shared. And I wanted to ask if there's anything about the story of the site and your involvement with it that I've missed, that you want to add in.

Jorde: [Laughs] Wow, tell the story—I'm trying to think. It's going to be one of those things where as soon as we get off, I'm like oh my goodness, I forgot about that. But I did remember the name, my friend, and he's passed away, Harry Wurster. He was the gentleman that worked for City Hall Park. He was a NYC Parks employee that brought this to my attention in the very beginning and I always like to give credit to Harry—I'd like to remember Harry that way because it was how it impacted him that really moved me because he was so deeply struck by learning this history. It's important for me to always remember him. But no, I think I've shared many of the key stories.

Just in reflection, and it was back to something that I said, so much of my memory around this project—and you can tell—it isn't really a lot of the names and the dates and all of that stuff. It's really those moments, those challenging moments, those pivotal moments where you're having to right something that has gone terribly wrong. And the thing that has been difficult, which is why this is so interesting to be sharing this stuff with you guys, is because some of the people that I know that you've interviewed are people who worked for the city or who were in that

realm. These stories impact who these people were, and it's kind of tough but it's an important story. And I really don't share it to demean anybody, when I talk about, whether it's the commissioner, whether it's about a federal appointee, but it's about the story and it's about the path that had to be taken and the battles that had to be won, or at least to be engaged in, in order to make inroads behind closed doors.

The one thing that I'm hopeful of is that there's going to be a lot of people—and there are a lot of people—who are like me, who are sitting behind those closed doors and they're thinking about if I open my mouth, am I going to lose my job? Or am I going to be demoted? Or am I going to be sidelined? Because that's very real. I mean, it has happened. And is somebody going to find that they're going to have to shut me down in some way because I'm going to speak to this issue? I found that was one of the biggest challenges for me because I would say stuff and then I'm thinking, I may not have a job tomorrow, or somebody's going to reprimand me. You're crossing boundaries. And I often think about that. I'm amazed that I still stayed, that nobody completely nixed [laughs] me early on. But I would be hopeful that other people—I would hope that those that I did go toe to toe with are changed. And those that were witnessing it were changed. And that anybody who hears about some of these challenges will be courageous enough to go toe to toe when you have to go toe to toe about those issues because it has changed how we protect sites like the African Burial Ground or other sites relative to African American presence, African American lives and history in this country.

It's still an ongoing battle. You still have people in small towns—as I said, I'm working with a person in a small town in Georgia, and when it came to the archaeologists, you don't know

whether they're not following a protocol because of who the site belongs to. They're not engaging the community really in any real way, like the African Burial Ground in New York ended up doing. So it's still work that needs to be done and that's what I mean in terms of the project still informing the work I'm doing now.

Q: I think that might be a nice place to end with all that you've shared. From the detail that you've shared today, it feels like you haven't just shared the story but also laid out, here's some ways that you can engage. No shortage of opportunity unfortunately. But thank you for sharing and sharing with such clarity also.

Jorde: Oh, thank you. I'm sorry, I felt like there's so much, that I'm thinking oh, my God, why can't I remember that person's name?

Q: Every project is unique but I often think how can this be a road map to somebody in the future when they come across it in an archive, how is this a document that keeps on living or a story that keeps on living.

Jorde: I'm glad you said that because, for me, the story of this—at least my journey—has been, you're not following the rules. I mean, the work that I did, you're not following the rules. You're having to always step outside the box, whether it's send a photo to the press, whether it's I've got to set up a meeting strategically and secretly over here and here's what we need. You need to do this, that and the other. It is a process that is not unfamiliar to the African American community if one considers the Civil Rights Movement. We are often a community that is marginalized and

subject to sometimes arbitrary boundaries based on race that we must cross if we want to effect change. And anybody who's in politics understands exactly what I'm talking about. Nobody colors within the lines if they truly want change. Everybody's coloring outside the lines. And it's a tough thing to do when you're not the one in charge and you're the one sort of coming up through the ranks. So if there's anything to be learned—I mean, thankfully, I did it. But scared every day—uh oh, today's going to be the day—but then you do it and get through the challenge. You skinned your knee and then you keep going, and you keep doing it because it's the right thing to do. And you see a path forward. And, believe me, a lot of times, some of the things that I did, they weren't planned out in the beginning. It was just an opportunity to move the project in the right direction. Something presented itself and you have a choice to make. Do you speak to it? Do you do something about it? Or do you walk away? And in every instance, I just kept going forward. And it often meant that you were just going to have to color outside of the lines because that was the only other way to get things accomplished.

So I appreciate that. So if this recording can help inform people, whether it's about historic preservation of a resource, and a people who were rarely chronicled, or anything else, then I'm happy. I'm happy that it could be helpful.

Q: Well, thank you so much again.

Jorde: All right, thank you.

Q: Yes, I'll be in touch in the next few weeks and if anything does come to mind, feel free to

send me a quick email and we’ll work it into the final transcript.

Jorde: Okay, great. Thank you.

Q: Thank you and enjoy your day. Bye-bye.

Jorde: You too. Bye-bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]