

OAKWOOD ORAL HISTORY PROJECT TRANSCRIPT

Betsy Ross (She and her husband John Clay moved to 604 Elm Street in 1984)

Interviewed by Peter Rumsey and Jerry Blow on June 11, 2010 at her home on 513 Polk Street in Oakwood, Raleigh.

Betsy: Great.

Peter: So.

Betsy: She didn't bark when you came, because she was on the back deck, but she can't stay out there long. It's too ...

Jerry: So, just give a signal of some sort if I lose sound.

Peter: This is June 11, at a little after 2:00 on a Saturday afternoon, on a partly cloudy hot 94 degree day at the home of Betsy Ross, John Clay in the heart of historic Oakwood. Betsy has agreed to the interview, however has not yet signed a release and is requesting and have granted that request; that she have both the opportunity to review and have power of edit over the recording that we will be shortly making. And has further specifically requested that the edited version not appear in the Oakwood newsletter. Betsy, do you have any questions at this point?

Betsy: No, I don't.

Peter: What I'm going — what I would like you to do just to start this off is just introduce yourself. And mention when you moved to Oakwood and the houses that you've lived in in Oakwood. Just as a way of framing your connection directly to Oakwood. And then I will pursue a number of questions related to specific homes and contributions you've made in Oakwood, but also more broadly elsewhere. Tell us who that is in the back ...

Betsy: Shall I keep going?

Peter: Tell us who that is in the background.

Betsy: That is our big old dog who would like to be in the same room with us. Aw.

Peter: It's okay, if he wants to come in and just sit with us.

Betsy: All right.

Peter: Can I just let him in?

Betsy: Let's try that.

Peter: Jerry, is that coming good, clear?

Jerry: When Bet ...

Betsy: We're going to have to let her in. [inaudible]

Jerry: When Betsy speaks softly ...

Betsy: I think it'll be all right.

Jerry: ... it's noticeably softer.

Peter: Okay. Well ...

Jerry: But I think — I think once she gets to speaking normally, it'll be fine.

Peter: All right, the dog's going to be part of the interview.

Judd: Sorry.

Peter: And feel free to join us, if you'd like.

Judd: No that's — that's all right.

Peter: I'm going move this as ...

Betsy: So, do you want me to begin?

Peter: I'm going to move this as close — yeah, go ahead.

Betsy: Well, I'm Betsy Ross. We first moved to Oakwood in — Labor Day weekend 1984, my husband and I, John Clay. And we moved into 603 Elm Street, where we lived until the fall of 2000, when we moved to our present home at 513 Polk Street.

Peter: How did you make a decision to come to Oakwood?

Betsy: My husband had a job offer at NC State University, and in looking to see about — coming here to see about that job, we thought, okay, if we move... where would we live in Raleigh? And while he was in interviews, I drove around the city and happened upon this neighborhood. And I was immediately drawn to it, and found the house on Elm Street shortly thereafter. And pursued that and got it and moved in in the fall of 2000 — I'm sorry, 1984.

Peter: Where did you come from?

Betsy: We came from Newport, Virginia, which is a small hamlet outside of Blacksburg. We were both employed at Virginia Tech. And like I said, John got an offer here at NC State and we decided to give it two years.

Peter: Now, you're an architect.

Betsy: Yes, I'm an architectural designer.

Peter: And what, as an architect, attracted you to the Oakwood neighborhood?

Betsy: Well, obviously, the architecture. The sense of a neighborhood that looked as if it would be also a great community. Not — I mean we looked all over the area for a place to live. And while there were some interesting other buildings, no neighborhood really struck me as did Oakwood. Just again, just visual — this was all visual. I didn't know anyone here. And but just really liked the density of the houses and the closeness to downtown, and really the closeness to NC State campus. We had come from a very rural area and lived out in the country and this just seemed like a good change. A way of sort of jumping right into downtown Raleigh, which was very different then.

Peter: From country mouse to city mouse.

Betsy: Yeah, very different then from what it is now.

Peter: What are some of those differences?

Betsy: Well, it's come alive. The downtown had gone through those transformations of many an American town, where they close the main street, made it pedestrian. Closed it to traffic. And there was — it was just a much less diverse community city with not nearly as many people or — and all that they bring — restaurants, art, music. The liveliness of living just has exploded, since we came here in the mid eighties. And it's really nice to have fallen into this neighborhood, which like I say, is close to downtown and been able to witness that transformation. That such a big wonderful change to how lively it is.

Peter: Within Oakwood itself, you have been a major force in changing or adding things that have helped create and expand that sense of community; among them specifically the Oakwood Common. Tell me about the origins of the Common and your involvement with it.

Betsy: Well, I certainly — it took a couple hundred people to put the Common together, as you know. But it sprung from an idea of — Oakwood was already having several social events each year like the jazz brunch and Fourth of July picnic parade. And those had to be held at different people's — in different people's yards, because we didn't have a gathering place. So, it sort of all started with the idea of getting a piece of land that — a lot that could be used by the community for those events. As well as a place to sort of meet and greet your neighbor.

And it evolved into the idea of a small inner neighborhood park with a tot lot at one end. And eventually, the idea evolved into giving it to the city, so that it became a public park. And that whole process took about five years.

Peter: What was your role?

Betsy: I agreed to and became the Chair of the committee to establish the Oakwood Common.

Peter: Who were some of the other people that figured prominently in that effort to create the park?

Betsy: It's such a long list and would — you know it's complicated, because it seemed like whenever there was a stumbling block and there were many — someone would appear or step up to get us through that latest bump in the road. And I mean to me that was sort of the miracle of it all. We got discouraged at a lot of different points and thought it would never work. You know we'd never raise the money or we'd never find the piece of land.

People who stand out, Ralph Campbell was our councilman, and he had good ideas about how to possibly put some money together. Eddie Coleman, was instrumental in the actual purchase of the piece of land. Basically, convincing the previous owner that this was a good thing to do with this corner lot. First, we had to find a corner lot, but made a lot of good friends in the city — Parks and Rec Department.

First a real estate division, as we searched for a lot, but I guess the idea of involving the city as a partner also evolved. Billy Brewer helped with all the — donated his time for any legal aspects that we needed to do. I have long lists of people who either contributed their time or money toward fundraising, and then actually digging holes for footings for fence and play equipment and benches; and landscape designers that helped with the layout. Ron Mace was a great consultant for keeping it accessible. I know I'm forgetting many more that, like I said, contributed at important junctures where — I guess that's part of the beauty of this neighborhood that the talents and skills that you find that you need to move a project forward are here. Just got to connect.

Peter: That's a great answer. I'm going to stop this for a minute just to — I'm want to double ...

Betsy: Well, She says hello. She will calm down, get in the bed.

Peter: Well, she's been receiving my undivided attention here. Well. Anything else you wanna say about the Common.

Betsy: Well I think, you know, it has, I was just reading the mission statement by the Park committee back in the late 80s and which was to envision a landscaped green space appropriate to this special historic area that draws individuals and families wanting to play or visited or visit, sorry, and all residents from neighborhood watch celebrations. This green area should also be a welcome place for the infirm, the eldest and the youngest residents of this community recognizing their special needs for an easily accessible park.

You know that was in the late 80s that we wrote that and so it's interesting to sit here in 2011 and to see that that has truly what has happened with it and continues to be in this neighborhood. Even though it is tiny, I think it really does offer a great place to meet and greet and also just be a rest bit for those who are walking around the neighborhood. So, it's very satisfying for me to see that, you know, an idea that several of us had and many people supported with their efforts has truly delivered. I am surprised by that in a way. You know, everybody has good ideas but its interesting to see it age well.

Peter: Well, vigilance has been part of that successful ageing and I know for a fact that you have on various occasions reminded us as a community, of its original purpose, which was for the young and the infirm. And, that at times, has conflicted with others who, within the neighborhood, thought that the playground, for example, should be redesigned for older kids and there has been a variety of other tensions. And, as I said, I know for a fact that you have been one of those, who has continued to remind us of that. I'd be interested in, I'm not interested in my, in hearing my own voice here, but I'd be interested in your just giving a brief statement of, again, what that original vision was and why and mentioning the Oakwood talk the Oakwood park elsewhere as an alternative for older children.

Betsy: Well, I think part of that comes from just establishing a common, made us the community and those who worked, we had to learn about putting in a playground, for example, in one end of the park for youngest children and as soon as you, you know, understand, in a world of playground design older children would need far more space. I mean it seems obvious but, so then the playground for, for

example, the older children would take up more of the common and you would lose more of the green area that's for everyone else. So, I think, you know it's a great idea to provide for older children, but there is limits to that on such a small area. So, I think it is just a matter of, it helps to remember the mission because it was based on pretty expensive study about these different functions that the amount of room or space could take. And also, you know, I think bigger children can venture out and go farther from home, be it walking or on bikes. And I think dogs have their own special spatial requirements. So, we are really fortunate to have Oakwood park just six-tenths of a mile from the common where there's, you know, a baseball field, picnic tables and a lot more room and adjacent to that now is a very cool dog park. So again, we have got these things pretty close by, so its almost, I am not sure if I've answered your questions but I just think I'd like it to be remembered as what the common is can handle only so much , its so small. And you know, I kind of wish we could add some land to it, do an addition. But at this time it is impossible. And I heard that it won't be 'coz a couple of buildings will have to go.

Peter: Speaking of buildings, you have a reputation far beyond oakwood, as an architect or architectural designer. Being, really having a gift of being able to work with people to preserve the character of buildings be it expanding or enlarging or otherwise modifying those buildings. Tell me where your sensibilities related to historic preservation arose?

Betsy: Well, when I was born my parents lived in, our family lived in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia where my mother had spent years as a really amateur historian researching that town and its history. I mean she was one of many but she was somewhat instrumental in Harper's ferry being declared a national park. And, I guess, I just grew up and absorbed great interest in history wherever she lived. And also, we lived in a pre-civil war house there that my, you know, sort of my first memories of my living space were in an old house. So, I guess, that always felt good to me to be surrounded by older materials and spatial relations that are based on old ways of living. So, I've often thought that was probably the start of it and then, just an evolving interest in architecture through my youth. And, my parents had a home built for their retirement and hired an architect in a small town in South West Virginia, [??]. And that architect happened to be a woman. So I was greatly inspired by her and her abilities and it was fascinating to me what she did. And, so I decided to study architecture and ended up in a program in Virginia Tech that's very much oriented toward mid-20th century modernism and contemporary architecture. And yet it was such a great design program that I think it opened our minds to really taking in and seeing wherever we are and interpreting why it's a good way to design and live. So, when I moved to Raleigh's, a friend asked me to consider serving on the historic districts commission and that led to a 6-year stint and I think that has greatly influenced my career as well because I was forced to gain a deeper a deep understanding of design guidelines and how they work to change, revise old buildings respectfully. And just sort of took that and ran with it and applied it to what I was doing.

Peter: What where some of your, the buildings that you most fondly remember that you had a part in helping design or restore?

Betsy: Well, my career has mostly been renovations in additions to residences. So I think some of those are definitely my projects I think fondly of. There's several in Oakwood, Jim Johnson's residence, [??] and Alice [??] residence on Boundary street. I worked with a woman named Brooks Graham whose home is on Deep River, her family's home until the national register, down below [Montclare??] in [??] County. Another project in Boylan Heights for, can't remember their names right now....Say again.

Betsy: No, can't remember. And then, the home of Bill and [??] on Ridge Road. That's probably enough to mention.

Peter: One of the things that I do know because I visited your earlier home on Elm Street, for all the work that you did drafting you did it in a very small, probably, closet sized space very nicely lighted on the front of a very small home. And it always impressed me that you were able to do so much in so little a space. Tell me about that house.

Betsy: Well, that house was about 1200 square feet and had a center chimney. So there were four fireplaces in caddy corner, 45 degrees in four rooms. And the very first room was an entrance hall or foyer which was not very large at all and that became my studio, because we needed all the other rooms for a family of what turned out to be four. Yeah, my drafting table was in the foyer.

Peter: The house that you moved into where we are sitting now on Polk Street, what did you do with this house when you moved here?

Betsy: In terms of a studio, I took over the dining room. Because there is a spacious kitchen here, so we are always eating in the kitchen. Therefore I had a rather large room to move into here for my office and that worked very well as well.

Peter: Your two sons have grown up in Raleigh. Tell me about your reflections looking back over having had two, your two children grow up and really be sons of Oakwood?

Betsy: Well, once again we were darn lucky. The whole sense of community, the number of families with children -- which I think has only grown, but they never lacked for friends, they never lacked for friends that were, simply put, over the back fence. You know, we felt they were safe running from our house to the neighbor's to play as younger boys and indeed, I think they were. But the other way we were really lucky is the great schools that we lucked into based on where we lived starting in our case with Conn Elementary. That was our district school and it happened to be a magnet. It very much benefitted from the diverse community that it served, Oakwood of which was less than half part, just a small percentage, really. But that led to my sons sort of automatically benefitting from the magnet school program of this county which resulted from a way to get diversity in Urban inner city schools which we knew nothing about but just again because of where we had chosen to live and start a family fell into and benefitted so much from the work of those before us who had the foresight to put all that together. So, I am really impressed with educations that they have received here in public schools and have been so thankful over and over that we were able to participate in the magnet program, just due to where we lived and the planning of many educators before us to enhance the schools in the urban core.

Peter: Where did they go to middle and high schools?

Betsy: They both went to Carnage Middle school and Enloe High school.

Peter: Where do they live now?

Betsy: Well, my older son Ben, went away to college in Virginia and is now back in Raleigh going to graduate school in NC state and he is renting a house in Oakwood, interestingly enough. My younger son Graeme, well, is a rising junior in Carolina in Chapel Hill and he of course lives there in the school year and is home for the summer. So, he is here as well.

Peter: As you...How has Oakwood changed in the time you lived here?

Betsy: Well more houses have obviously been bought and renovated and fixed back up. There used to be a lot more rental properties and I will call them boarding houses. You know, now we, its great to have some apartments but it was more of a boarding house era when we moved in that while making the neighborhood even more diverse, did have its own problems. Those have slowly been turned over or also fixed up. So that's one way the houses have changed. More and more have been reclaimed and some would say gentrified. I do think there are more young people with families now. It certainly feels that way, although when we started the common project we had done our survey and we had near about a 150 children, I guess, under the age of 12. I forget our cutoff in Oakwood. I don't know how many of them are there now but in my senses it is more than that. I also see a little bit less community involvement than perhaps there used to be. I feel like there is a great core group here that serves on the board does a lot of the work for, say the, candlelight tour, social events just spreading the word about Oakwood living but I see that number smaller it seemed to used to be. We seemed to have more neighborhood involvement I think in doing things for the neighborhood. I think it's a sign of the times. People are busy in doing their own things but that is a difference I've seen.

Peter: You mentioned a moment ago talking about the difference between rental and rooming houses and I think it suggested some of the value of rental housing within the neighborhood. Speak to that.

Betsy: Well, I guess if you know back in the depression years almost all the houses in Oakwood were divided into apartments. That's what I found out, just living here, working on various houses. There's evidence that a lot of them were converted to apartments and now most of them are single family again. And I think that it behooves us to realize that the buildings have been very adaptable and that's why they are still here, in my opinion. And, so the idea that they have to sort of stay one way or another for whatever reason, social or economic, you know, people think that their property values are higher if everything is single family. I am not particularly interested in further homogenation of my community. I think its richer when its more diverse in every way. So, I think we should be more open and welcoming to all people and that's one thing we can learn by looking back at the way, again, that the neighborhood has evolved providing housing for people all these years.

Peter: You have, well, being pursuing architecture for many years. More recently, I know, you have become interested in photography. Tell me about that.

Betsy: Well, I've been interested in photography since being in college where in architecture design school almost everyone was... had a camera available or certainly they were... It was a tool we learned to use. You know, we took classes in photography. Of course, that was all film photography. And, you know, everybody worked in the dark room, bought film in bulk and cut it up and put it in canisters and developed on our own and make prints. It was just, it was part of the process at that time for architects for obvious reasons. And interestingly enough I did my thesis, my final year thesis, I was in a 5-year program and I did my final thesis in photography in the college of architecture. So, its always been a tool that I've turned to, to record the process of design, you know, construction, recording my projects as they went from the drawing board to in the ground, so to speak. Because to me it was a way of learning about the process that I was involved in. but then also I have always had a fondness for capturing friends and family on film and sort of keeping a record of their lives as well. So, its just been not only a parallel to my design and architectural work but a passion as well.

Peter: Any chance any of those could be given to the Oakwood archives, those packages of work that you have done in the Oakwood area.

Betsy: Do you mean the Houses and the additions. Sure. I hadn't thought of that.

Peter: That would be great addition to the archives that Matthews is assembling. Anybody else or anything else that you would want to talk about.

Betsy: Well. I guess its...the biggest challenge that John and I are facing now is my diagnosis, almost exactly an year ago, of stage 4...I have stage 4 lung cancer and I've been, you are going to have to edit this a bit, because I want to say, I have seen whole another side. I can't get it out. I was just trying to put my thoughts together and say that not only has Oakwood been such a wonderful community to live in, rear a family, live in but also to die in. That's what I've learned in the last year.