

**Friends of the Hoboken Public Library**

**Oral History Project**

2010 Interview with

Ralph Seligman,

City Planner,

who came to Hoboken in the 1960's.

He wrote the application

for Hoboken to qualify for the

Model Cities Program.

FRIENDS OF THE HOBOKEN PUBLIC LIBRARY  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: RALPH SELIGMAN  
INTERVIEWERS: GRACE LYNCH & CAROLINE CARLSON  
LOCATION: HOME OF RALPH & PEARL SELIGMAN  
ROOSEVELT, NEW JERSEY  
DATE: 6 MARCH 2010

CC: It's Saturday, March 6, 2010. This is an interview with Ralph Seligman, conducted by Grace Lynch and Caroline Carlson, in Ralph's home in Roosevelt, New Jersey.

Ralph, let's start with your life before you came to Hoboken. Tell us where and when you were born, and a little bit about your early years.

RS: Okay. I've known Hoboken all my life. It's kind of interesting. I'm really a New Yorker. Both my parents were New Yorkers. They met again when they were working in New Orleans and Macon, Georgia respectively, and they married there. So I have confounded immigration

officials all my life when they look at where I was born -- Macon, Georgia -- but I'm really a New Yorker.

But about Hoboken -- my mother had a Model A car, a great car. Hoboken had a ferry that you could put a car on, to go to New York. So to get to my upper class German-Jewish relatives (that means something to Jews), we would drive from Irvington, where we lived for quite a while, take the ferry -- take the Hoboken ferry, which in those days served coffee and cakes on the trip. It was very luxurious -- and then we would drive up to the Upper East Side, where my German great-grandmother lived. My cousins and I would play in Central Park, while my family visited my great grandma, who was a tyrant.

Anyway, my father loved ships -- I think maybe they gave him an escape from my mother -- but he really loved ships, and Hoboken, in those days, had impounded a lot of German ships during World War I. Some of them, like the Leviathan, were still there. So Hoboken, and ships, and going to see Great-Grandma, were all very early experiences in my life.

GL: Now were you born in Irvington? Or were you born down in Macon, Georgia?

RS: I was born in Macon.

CC: What year?

RS: Nineteen-twenty-two. I'll be eighty-seven -- eighty-eight this week.

GL: Eighty-eight this week. Yep. Big birthday.

Ralph, when you were young you lived in Irvington?

RS: Yes. There were still farms when we moved to Irvington. Just down the street from us there were farms. Union County had a lot of farms, and we were right on the borderline with Union County. The street I lived on happened to be the approach street to a park called Olympic Park, an amusement park -- a mini-Steeplechase Park.

GL: Ralph, what did your dad do? What did your parents do?

RS: My father was in the insurance business. There was always this uncertainty about my father. Was he born in the United States or not? His father lived in Brighton Beach, so we had my father's side living in Brighton Beach, and my mother's side living on the Upper West Side of New York. It was not what you would call a marriage of equals.

CC: Where did you study, Ralph, and how did you get interested in -- ?

RS: Chancellor Avenue Public School, Irvington High School. We're talking Depression time now. I went to a junior college in Newark, Essex Junior College, which was remarkably good. It had some really terrific, lovely people in it. It was also next to what used to be called Newark State, which has become Kean College now, so we would mix with the Kean College kids. They were a big influence. The ones in the Art Department were a big influence in my life. They knew who Ben Shahn was long before I did, and they were going down to Roosevelt to visit him, and I didn't even know who they were talking about.

GL: And where did you go to college --  
before you studied "art."

RS: Essex Junior College. In the war, I went to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, which is in Great Neck, on the former Walter P. Chrysler estate. It's so interesting how earlier lives impinge on later lives. My cousins and my playwright uncle -- their playwright father -- lived in Great Neck, and we used to go swimming at the public beach, which was right next to the Walter Chrysler estate. One of the big items of the day was when Chrysler would go to Wall Street in his own yacht.

GL: So that piece of college you did while you were in the Merchant Marine?

RS: That same estate, that I watched from the public section -- that public section got incorporated into the military academy.

GL: And where did you go to planning school?  
Or where did you study planning?

RS: Oh, that was a long time later.

CC: Let's ask him how he got interested in planning.

RS: Okay. I got an undergraduate degree in economics from Berkeley, so I have a B.A. from Berkeley.

GL: So you finished your education in Berkeley.

RS: Part of it. The military academy was so generous that they took my graduate work, later -- I got a master's in planning -- but the Merchant Marine Academy took those credits, plus my sea time and experience at the Merchant Marine Academy -- so I have two undergraduate degrees, one from Berkeley, and one from the Merchant Marine Academy, on the two coasts, and I have a master's from Hunter.

CC: And what's your master's in?

RS: What's the title they use for it?

Planning and Urban Development, I guess is what they called it at Hunter.

CC: So what got you interested in going to graduate school in Planning and Urban Development?

RS: This town.

CC: What's this town?

GL: Roosevelt.

RS: Roosevelt. We moved here. I felt grateful to the New Deal all my life. At a time when, for me, it wasn't the Great Depression, it was the Great Dysfunction, it was the Great Bad Time, and the only thing that gave hope was the New Deal. And to come to a New Deal town was to be reinvigorated. These are the people -- and it goes with an economics background. But the whole field of planning, believe it or not, was new to me, even though Berkeley had one of the best planning schools in the country. I didn't know about it. But when I came here, I

said, "Gee, this works," and people participated. People were very proprietary. As soon as I studied planning -- just to show you how much people -- a significant portion of the people who were here. Jack Grossman, who was a cutter for Ceil Chapman, or some fashion designer, said, "You're studying planning? You should be on our planning board. Go out and sign up for our planning board."

GL: So were you on the planning board here in Roosevelt, before you studied?

RS: Yes. Then I said, "Boy, I have to learn more about this. This is great. I like it. But, you know, community organization, also, has a relationship to going to sea. Because the smallest community I can think of is the ship's crew. They have to interact. They come with skills, and you use these skills. You begin with a bunch of strangers who don't even know anything, and you find yourself, as I did, on an eight-month voyage, where you're locked up with the same thirty-three other guys that you began the voyage with.

I mentioned Newark State College because Newark State College kids were really avant-garde. The head

of the Art Department lived in the Village. She had the kids over there, so I was going to Café Society Downtown before I was going to other places. So it was this mixture, and they interested me in this whole idea of ships, really. You have to have a successful community if you're going to last the voyage.

GL: We're building on the resources of everything that somebody has to do.

RS: During wartime, half of these guys were new. There was a tremendous enrollment in the Merchant Marine Academy, but it was a very good school. One of the main problems, which nobody seemed to take as a problem was how do you get along? How do you last for a long voyage? I was on a tanker. I was on this tanker because I wanted to sail on the latest fashion in ships. It was turbo-electric. It was a long, long voyage, a lot of city guys, and no diversion. None of the usual city diversions. Nothing. You're there, and you're doing the same watch, the same work pattern every day -- the same job, the same time. If you're on the 12:00 to 4:00 or the midnight to 4:00, noon to 4:00, and you're there for like ten months. Now if

you're doing this, and you're also on the equator, you're getting the same time of day and the same temperature every day. The monotony -- the casualties -- a lot of the casualties in the Merchant Marine came from guys just flipping out, because they just were not used to living without being diverted. You couldn't have radio, you couldn't have any of that. It was wartime. In this case, the Japanese could tap into whatever you did. If you're in the Atlantic -- my first trips were in the Atlantic -- they'll tap into that.

So you're really on your own. So you're working with the idea of a community. How do you make it work? I had had a major disappointment when I was going to Junior College. I wanted very much to go to Black Mountain College. It was adventurous, it was smart, and I had no money. I applied for a scholarship. I was one-down, never made it, so what I tried to do was turn my Junior College into a model, modeling it on Black Mountain. My idea of modeling is -- it really goes back to this old folk tale about the "stone soup," which I think is the most important part of my planning education -- when the beggar comes up to the door, the farmer's door, and says to the lady, "Do you have any food?" and she says, "I don't have any food."

And he says, "Well, I have something that makes food. I have this beautiful limestone, which I keep very clean. If you can give me a pot of boiling water, I can get you the best soup you ever had." Then he says, "Do you have this? Do you have this? Do you have this?" And it's a matter of "expiration." What do you have that you really aren't aware that you have?

GL: And each party adds to that process.

RS: Each party "adds to the life."

GL: A new ingredient.

RS: A new personality, and another set of interests.

So we got a letter of commendation from the Health Department, because we were one of the very few tankers that were stuck as sort of floating reservoirs in the Pacific Ocean, that didn't have self-inflicted casualties, so people -- so the guys could get home, get "away," who can do this.

I had had this experience -- this disappointment -- not getting into Black Mountain, trying to make my Junior College more like Black Mountain, and discovering, say, that the registrar, a very sweet lady, was also great with music. So we started a course in music, and started doing that. Well, I just carried that idea over to the ship. Two guys on the ship knew how to box, and had brought boxing gloves. We had a boxing tournament within a month. A couple knew how to play chess; we had a chess tournament within a short amount of time. There were these two marvelous old-timers. The newly-arrived merchant seamen -- you could tell them. They were fidgety. These old guys sat like stones. One was Hawaiian, one was -- I forget what he was. German -- and they knew more about seamanship, and had come down in the tradition of how do you come? You serve an apprenticeship. They gave a course in knot-tying. Where was this knot used? Why was it used? How do you do it right? And they had all these ways. They could do that scrimshaw that sailors do -- all those things that sailors -- so they never had time on their hands. They never got fidgety. They blended in with the ocean.

GL: And they had a skill to share.

RS: They had a skill to share. They were wonderful teachers.

GL: Ralph, other than the time on the ships, what other kinds of -- ?

RS: That was my first community. That was the first community ever.

GL: Kind of a formative need to continue --

RS: Kind of a continuum, yes.

GL: What other kinds of jobs did you work on, that also kind of propelled you along your way?

RS: I did jobs that did a lot of selling to people. I told you there was an amusement park at the head of our street in Irvington. We'd get a summer job, at terrible wages -- like ten cents an hour -- at the amusement park. "Step right up, have a photograph made, four for a dime." That's what it was. That kind of stuff.

Or knock down the milk bottles, or Poker Fascination. I  
Guessed Weights. Whatever it was, I worked -- and you're  
then exposed to all these people every day, just rivers of  
people. By the end of the summer I could tell you what high  
school a kid went to by the way the kid dressed, the  
accent, and all that stuff. We began to look for these sort  
of community personalities that were there.

CC: After that -- was that before or after  
you went to Berkeley?

RS: That was before Berkeley. Berkeley was  
post-war.

CC: And then after Berkeley was planning  
school. Did you have any other early work experiences,  
before you came to Hoboken --

RS: Sure.

CC: -- after college?

RS: My work experiences were working -- probably the most important one -- Newark had this wonderful fierce old librarian, Beatrice Winsor, who ran this program where only if you were going to college could you be a "stack person." We put the books back where they belonged, etc. It was great. I met a bunch of guys like I'd never met before. They were smart, they were funny, and there was a lot of camaraderie there. It was another kind of community. So you were exposed to the community at large. People came to use the library, just as I was exposed to a huge community in the amusement park, people of all kinds -- usually the middle class and lower middle class, and what kinds of sales techniques they responded to, etc. But, again, this was people, and how do they -- so there was a theme that I wasn't really aware of, that was following me through the various jobs that I had. It all had to do with the idea of community.

Then I came to Roosevelt, and it was a community. And wow, it was a planned community. Now was that Communism? But it worked. People felt responsible for it. Like Jack Grossman.

GL: Participants in the process.

RS: I was very impressed by that, and by the New Deal. Yes.

GL: So Ralph, how long did you live in Hoboken before you actually started to study planning?

RS: I was commuting from Roosevelt in the early days.

CC: Were you living in Hoboken?

RS: No. I never lived in Hoboken until I got so busy, at a later point.

CC: So when did you first come to Hoboken, and why?

RS: Well, I came to Hoboken to take the ferry to New York, to see my great-grandmother.

CC: I mean, when did you come --

GL: -- as a profession; to do professional work.

RS: Oh, as a profession. When I met your father -- Grace's father. He was one of the -- "intelligence" doesn't begin to tell the story. It was applied intelligence, one of the smartest people about the way communities really worked; about the politics of working-class, Hudson County communities, incredibly insightful. He was the one who talked me into coming to work for Mayo Lynch.

GL: Where did you meet him, Ralph? Were you taking classes together?

RS: Oh. Okay. Remember, 1950 I'm in Hoboken. In 1950 -- yes. In 1951 I get a call one day that said, "Sterling told me I should call you. We're coming to live in New York." It turns out that this is the English wife of an Englishman who's on a scholarship -- fellowship, really, graduate fellowship -- he's at the Institute for Advanced Study, and he had met my former roommate at Berkeley, and he was now in Princeton.

One of the things that kept me from going buggy on long trips was on our first trip -- the first trip I had made -- was to Sicily. One of the guys came back from his first day ashore, and he had this little banjo mandolin, a tiny little thing, beautiful. He said, "Do you want to buy it?" I said, "How much?" and he said, "Five bucks. I'm not gonna use it." That mandolin kept me company all the time I went to sea. I really had a very privileged war. As a cadet, I shared a cabin with another cadet. After that, I had my own cabin; my bed was made by somebody; somebody else cooked my food; washed my sheets and did all that. All I had to worry about was maybe we'd get torpedoed one day. Those are pretty good odds.

GL: So what year did you come to Hoboken to start working?

RS: Well, in continuation of the story of the call from England -- I met this Englishman, and he was blind. He was blinded the last week of World War II. A sniper's bullet hit the bridge of his nose and destroyed the optic nerve, and it was gone. He was a marvelous, marvelous guy.

GL: That's Alan Milne.

RS: Alan Milne. His field was philosophy. His work opportunities in the United States, in New Jersey, were at the Institute for Advanced Study. So I met some pretty interesting people there.

GL: Is that about the time --

RS: That was 1950.

GL: Is that about the time you met Dad? Or was that earlier?

RS: No. I met your father because -- oh, I know. Yes. Because Alan lived in England, we had somebody to -- and I went to England already being aware that planning was a major activity in England. I started reading this and visiting, so Pearl and I spent a year in Europe. We did it on \$3,000 we'd saved, and managed to buy a little mini-car; we both got jobs and the rest of it. It's been a long time. But when I came back, I said, "I'm going to work

for a planner." So it was after my year in England that I pretty much -- I talked to a lot of people. I met the head of the planning school at the University of Liverpool, who invited me to tea, and we talked about cricket (which my friend Alan had explained to me, so I at least knew the terms of that game).

GL: And I'm guessing a few planning conversations, too, to boot.

RS: What transpired -- when I went to the University of Liverpool, Sir Miles Wright was the man I met, the one who was so kind and had me for tea. He said, "Look, if you're interested in planning, if I were you I'd study in the country where I'm going to practice." So as soon as we got back from England, which was September of about 1957, I guess, I looked for a job, and I got hired immediately.

CC: Where were you working then, immediately?

RS: In Newark. One of the major planning firms in the state was called Candeub & Fleissig, and I just asked -- I said, "Look, I'll work for cheap." They said, "No, you won't. From your experience, you ought to do very well in this kind of work." They hired me, and I was the planner for East St. Louis, which was probably the most poverty-stricken municipality in the whole United States. Candeub sent me out there to get my feet wet. He was if not *the* biggest consulting-planning firm, he was close to it.

GL: And how did you get to Hoboken?

RS: Car.

GL: No, no. I meant your first -- how did you make the connection to start working in Hoboken? Through Candeub?

RS: Hoboken was always my favorite city. When I worked in the library, Hoboken was a very inexpensive but a very pleasant night out.

GL: But when you left Candeub & Fleissig,  
was there a reason?

RS: I left because there was a cut in  
federal funding, and that dropped off. Oh. My skill had  
been in construction as -- what the British call a  
"quantities surveyor," cost surveyor for materials that go  
into construction. So I earned a living after I parted from  
the library as a cost estimator.

CC: I want to ask you how you started  
working with Joe Lynch.

GL: How did you find him, or how did he find  
you?

CC: And the name of the company would be  
good to hear.

RS: Candeub & Fleissig.

GL: Yes. But when you came to work with Dad.

RS: That was later. My first planning company was Candeub & Fleissig.

GL: Right. And that's when you worked in St. Louis.

RS: Federal funding dropped off, so I went back to construction. But I continued going to graduate school. Once I started --

GL: Okay, Ralph. So the job with Candeub & Fleissig -- when the funding fell out, you had continued to work in construction. Then you went back to graduate school?

RS: I continued with graduate school. Once I started, I had made my commitment, and the more I worked in it, the more at-home I felt.

GL: And was that all at Hunter?

RS: No, the first program I was in was one that was run jointly by NYU, which did the social studies part. And what's in Brooklyn?

GL: Pratt.

RS: Pratt -- the Pratt Institute, which did the planning part.

GL: Is that where you met Joe Lynch? Because he was at Pratt.

RS: That's where I met Joe.

GL: He was at Pratt. He was studying planning at Pratt. Okay.

RS: We're talking now 1958. Nineteen-fifty-eight.

CC: Then how did you actually come to work in Hoboken?

RS: Because Joe Lynch said to me, "At some point you've got to stop screwing around. You're either going to go into planning, or you're not. So I'm going to start a planning section of my engineering company, and the job is yours if you want to take it. But make up your mind." That was how I started. [Laughs] Does that sound like your father?

GL: Unfortunately, it does sound like my father. But also, in the sense of -- so the two of you started on that endeavor together, in the late '50s.

RS: I told you just recently about Hoboken, how we went through Hoboken on the way to my great-grandmother's. I went to Hoboken when I was doing other work, and when I was working in Hudson County. One of the construction companies I worked for was S. They painted the George Washington Bridge, and stuff like that.

So here I am, back in Hoboken a lot, and I always liked it. I liked the feel, I liked the feel of the city. There was a camaraderie that was best expressed at the Clam Broth House. Now I know they didn't let women in there --

GL: Not then.

RS: Not then -- but there were guys on the way home, on the Erie-Lackawanna, and they would stop in the Clam Broth Bar, and it didn't make any difference how expensive their attaché cases were, they talked. Everybody talked. They said -- that was a community place.

GL: So when you were taking classes at Pratt, Dad had started his company, in 1951. I think, he incorporated in '53, so it was about '59-'58 when you started to work in Hoboken with him --

RS: Yes.

GL: -- and you started that planning department.

CC: What kinds of projects did you work on in Hoboken?

GL: When you came to Hoboken, and you were starting up that planning department with Mayo Lynch, how did you start?

RS: Okay. We started partly at Joe Lynch's suggestion. He was always looking for a more practical way to do things, and there was this program that, after my experience at Candeub & Fleissig, I thought this program was more productive of good results. It was called a Community Renewal Program.

GL: That's the name I couldn't think of, Caroline.

RS: It had to do with assessing a community's needs, but then spelling out the projects that were available through the government, and how to put them together in order to -- because you not only specified a project, as you did with a master plan -- if you even got that far with the master plan -- and they just said, "Well, you ought to have this --" The Community Renewal Program was much better than that. It was this program, this federal program, has these kinds of objectives, so you were

starting with something that, for me, was better than the master plan, which is sort of airy, fairy, and theoretical. This was what do you do, how do you do it, and what results do you expect from it, and what does it cost, and how do you afford it?

GL: Now the needs-assessment that would have gone into it -- was that a federally funded program? Did you apply for federal grants?

RS: Housing and Home Finance Agency.

GL: So you were aware that that was available, and then you started to do the needs-assessment.

RS: I had worked for Candeub & Fleissig. I was in touch with people who were doing actual planning, etc. People I met in my very brief time with Candeub & Fleissig have remained my friends forever. I can't tell you -- I won't bother going into the names of them -- there were conversations with them: "What are you doing? How are you doing?" It was also a time when Jonny Shahn, who lives in town, was living in Boston, and Jane Jacobs was really

stirring things up with her books, and pointing out the difference (which I just thought was marvelous) of saving all the buildings, of using them, of converting them.

GL: It was '61, right, when she published *The Death and Life of American Cities*.

RS: *The Death and Life of American Cities*, and it was a very appealing thing. And since Jon Shahn, who lives in Roosevelt, was up there -- we've been friends since he was ten -- and I would go up there, and we'd go around the city and talk to people and meet his friends.

CC: Ralph, how did the Community Renewal Program transition into your work at the beginning of the Hoboken Model Cities program?

RS: The Model Cities Program was grounded in the Community Renewal Program. When I became the planner for Hoboken, I imagined -- let me just say, if I'm not flattering myself -- I realized what a complex city Hoboken is, and, always, how unappreciated it was as a special place.

RS: So at this time there were these fights going on in Boston between a city's character -- the way a city would develop; what about its character? How much do you respect it? How valuable is it? I had a friend from Roosevelt I used to visit in Boston, so I got even closer up on this.

GL: So this was in the early '60s.

RS: This was in the early '60s, yes. I didn't want to sell people an empty bag of goods. I had read about this planner, Walter Thabit, who was a friend of Jane Jacobs, who herself was doing work in Boston.

GL: Was he planning in Boston?

RS: Oh, yes. What impressed me was that he had stopped Robert Moses from changing the character of where you went to school -- Cooper Union --

GL: Downtown in the Village, right. That was a fight that Jane Jacobs and all those urban activists were fighting.

RS: Right. I always seem to know somebody who knows somebody, so I knew somebody who knew Walter Thabit, who had successfully defeated (the toughest guy in the world to defeat) Robert Moses. We talked. He had his own firm, and while I started off by thinking, you know, he's the precious little hero of the *Village Voice*, I changed immediately and saw him as one of the neatest thinkers, cleanest thinkers, thorough thinkers I've ever met. He was a marvelous guy to work with. That's Walter Thabit. He was just marvelous. And he was interested in Hoboken. He had come here. Walter's not alive now. I think he came here once, and wanted to get an abortion for his wife -- but never mind.

So he had a whole planning staff at the time, and somehow everything seemed to fall in together.

GL: So he came in as a consultant to you, with --

RS: Yes, as a consultant to me. But Walter certainly should have taken credit for that community. That was Walter's work, it was his staff's work, and it was a great staff. Walter's an extremely modest guy, and all that stuff with the Voice -- that was somebody else's doing. That wasn't Walter pushing himself.

GL: Now Ralph --

RS: Go ahead. We're talking 1962.

GL: Right. I just have a quick question, before we go into the Model Cities Program, and some of these things which were worked on with the Hoboken Planning Board, in the sense that you were representing them. But was the planning board in Hoboken well established when you got there?

RS: Oh, they already had a master plan. Fleissig had done the master plan for Hoboken.

GL: Candeub & Fleissig. Okay. That was the question I had. And did they have an ordinance at that time?

RS: They had ordinances, as they say, up the kazoo. Yes, they had lots of ordinances. What they didn't have -- and what I once remembered in a conversation with a state official -- I was talking about a state program that had to do with transportation, and I said, "You know, this place is really a goldmine. It has all these different possibilities." And this state official said, "Yes, but to get any benefit from a goldmine, you've got to go work in the mine, and nobody in Hoboken wants to do the work."

GL: So by consolidating all that effort into the community program, that was the seed --

RS: What the Community Renewal Program gave -- an initial program that paid my salary, that paid Walter Thabit's salary. It had enough flexibility, and was more daring than the master plan. It wasn't a conventional program. Come up with a result. Show where you're going to get the money for these projects. Don't spin out a project

that just looks marvelous, show how you're going to do it. Then you'll see how you build from this, and get to where you want to go.

CC: What was the project or projects that you worked on that got funding, and became reality.

RS: That's the program that I began my connection with Hoboken on.

GL: The Model Cities.

RS: It wasn't Model Cities, it was Community Renewal.

GL: Community Renewal. But now you're working within the --

RS: The master plan was specific tasks, not specific philosophies -- which is the real difference. It was really hard-nosed stuff. What are you going to do, where are you going to get the money?

GL: And I think the question is, some of the projects that were implemented, based on the work that you did putting together the over-view in the community renewal plan -- what were some of those early projects that were implemented?

RS: Well, you know, we're back to stone soup again. I guess I got connected with a lot of their people. For example, there's this really wild guidance counselor professor from Kean College named Charlie McCracken. He insisted that anybody who was in his graduate program had to go work in the community. He wasn't going to do it. So he said, "Look, you want to use my guys? You can use them. I'll let you talk to them, I'll have them volunteer, I'll turn them loose." And I wound up with a shop teacher, with a marvelous black teacher -- smart, tough -- who taught -- she would cry when the black kids would tell her some of their problems, and she'd go home with them.

I wound up with these people from Newark State, who were volunteers, gaining graduate credits in their guidance planning course, being used -- it's that stone soup, again.

GL: In the community. And this was for open instruction for young people in Hoboken. The mechanism. I guess I'm asking about the mechanism.

RS: Yes. But again -- what do you have that isn't really being used? What we have that wasn't being used was this group of highly educated, socially aware, Protestant clergy. From that, we developed the 60 Garden Street Association. That's how that came about. You've got all this intelligence, and credentials, and philosophy, and it's all working for you. And you have these guys. You know some of those names. Franzine, who was the pastor of the Lutheran church. The Catholic church didn't want to work with us -- okay. They didn't have to -- but the Protestant church did.

So I had this very great addition by McCracken, of these people who were in his graduate program for guidance counseling. They were getting -- what are you trading? College credit. They were getting college credit for putting in time on my project.

CC: Was that the Tutoring and Counseling Center --

RS: Yes.

CC: -- or the 60 Garden Street Association?

RS: They merged. 60 Garden Street was the oversight; 60 Garden Street -- we needed it to make it a legal entity so it would be eligible for grants.

So it was a combination of what do you have that meets your needs? That advances you toward your objectives, which you have been working out with a careful thinker like Walter Thabit. His *doodles* were works of art! He was an amazing guy.

GL: But Ralph, you were now working at the city, if I understand it, on very many tiers. Because these are social solutions, these are --

RS: Yes.

GL: So maybe you could describe some of the levels that you started in community renewal -- how it was being manifest.

RS: It had a political side, because your father, Grace, is one of the smartest men I ever met, and also one of the most realistic. There's an idealism in him but he's tough. He's realistic. So you had to talk specific numbers, talk specific projects, and whoever you put in charge of this Community Renewal Program will probably be more interested if he's then the candidate for mayor in the mayoral elections coming up, than if he's just a bystander.

GL: People with stakes in the system -- simply put.

RS: The stake was there, and your father always knew what the stake was.

GS: And those projects were both -- I personally remember you guys pulling together some vest-pocket parks, in some --

RS: Let me tell you about the vest-pocket parks. Once you're on a roll like this, somehow everything that comes up, you say, "Oh! I could fit that someplace."

The vest-pocket parks came up because I had met somebody in Pennsylvania, in Philly, who was a leading theoretician on vest-pocket parks. One of them was Paul Hogan. He's written a number of books -- *Playgrounds for Free*, you'll find his name -- and he said, "Yes, I'd like to come to Hoboken," and he came. He organized, through the 60 Garden Street Association, so we already have that in place. And it involves not just the kids who live in the neighborhood, but I've had parents call down saying, "Where do I come? I'm coming down to help you."

GL: So the partnership with the Protestant community was probably one of the first applications of a community development corporation, the way they were viewed later -- at its really seed days.

RS: It may have been. I didn't know. But I knew there was this under-used, unrecognized, but jam-packed with some vanity, but wonderful conversation. But suppose, you know -- we're members of this project, and suppose in the middle of a sermon somebody comes and says something in the community, and another minister, sitting

in the back of the room says, "Maybe the community concern is more important than the sermon."

GL: But it was a cooperative partnership with the community.

RS: It was a wonderful amalgamation of saying who is eligible, ideally, and possibly, and realistically for this? And the ministers were good, because in Hoboken --

GL: So it wasn't an external planning process at those early stages. It was always an internal process; that it was engaging community --

RS: Well, it was, but we still had to draw up guidelines and this and that. But it was a hitherto untapped source of energy and brains in the community.

CC: I just want to move on, because I know that out of the Community Renewal Program grew your pivotal work in bringing the Model Cities Program to Hoboken. So

could you tell us about creating that application? Who you worked with? Who you brought together to do that?

RS: Yes. That was a new program that had just come along. We all looked at it and said, "This sounds like us." We could do this. Look at all the -- you're going to get a higher ranking when you go for a grant, and you're going to get more attention from the feds. You're also going to get money to do it. So it just seemed like a natural. We were just wrapping up the Community Renewal Program, which had this very detailed but functional, very functional background. It wasn't, as I said, ideological. It was functional. The streets need to be repaired. Well, what programs are there? What are all the possible sources for funding, that just doesn't come from the till? What kind of help can you get? How do you fit federal programs, and make them serve your ends? Everything really just came together, and the people listened.

And you would find these strange geniuses like Ray Wright. Remember Ray Wright?

GL: I do.

RS: So you hear about this one guy -- you're talking renewal. You're a Jane Jacobs devotee; you think that Hoboken has a housing stock and a field that ought to be encouraged, etc., etc., and then you find out that somebody has been doing it. What was one of the problems? Well, you only have one bathroom to a floor, right? You have to have one bathroom a "floor." Ray Wright put two bathrooms. He changed the outline, and put in two bathrooms. Then there was always this major problem of you can never solve a multi-occupancy building when the heat is right. Somebody's always cold, somebody's too hot, this and that, and Ray was smart. He put in those heating systems that Molly Lee pushed.

So here you have somebody who has all these "solutions," so what do you do? You say, "Well, now let's see how much more mileage can we get from this?" The state has money for demonstration programs, so you pick up money for Ray Wright. You've got a building for him ready to go, you're ready to go.

GL: But that was all subsequent to the Model Cities application.

RS: No, no. No, no. It was concomitant. At the same time.

CC: Can you talk about what thoughts you and Walter Thabit had when you were preparing the application?

RS: We hoped we'd score.

GL: But you put a lot of work into that application. That was a well-thought-out application with a lot of participants.

RS: My favorite memory -- one of my favorite memories of your father is when we talked about my working for him. He said to me, "You'll either work harder than you've ever worked in your life, or you'll add your name to the long list of failures who've shown up here." We did it all in seven years, and I never got your father nailed on that one. And it wasn't hard work. It was joy. It was like, "Look at all this stuff. It's all waiting for us."

GL: Who worked on that program, Ralph -- the Model Cities Program? What were some of the names who were involved.

RS: Walter Thabit.

GL: Was Peter Salins working with you then or was that later?

RS: You know, Peter Salins came in late, when the feds started using fancy terminology that needed somebody who taught planning currently. While Walter might have been able to do it, Peter had it and Peter was there.

GL: We had some good photographers, right?

RS: Well, I have a neighbor -- ah, yes. One of my neighbors here in Roosevelt -- Sol Libsohn -- one of his photographs was in *The Family of Man*. There have been lots of photographers going through Roosevelt. Roosevelt has a long connection with photography.

GL: Charles Pratt.

RS: But the new person who emerged from this was somebody named Charlie Pratt, whose grandfather happened to start an institution in Brooklyn called Pratt Institute. So Charlie called it the family school.

Charlie was wonderful. He loved working in Hoboken. He was perfect for it. I got a telephone call -- he had his own place on Isle au Haut in Maine. One winter day -- I mean, it's a stormy winter day -- I get a call and it's Charlie, and he says, "Ralph, how'd you like to go for a ride? I've got my boat outside." I said, "Thanks, Charlie. It's a little cold for me."

But he was wonderful. He's done a couple of books on photography since. Paul Hogan worked on the parks through somebody we knew in Philly. He's done a couple of books of his own -- *Playgrounds for Free*. I mean, the people were not nobody-people, and none of them had egos so big that they couldn't work with other people. I don't think anybody ever realized fully the quality of the people who somehow sort of came out of the blue. Here they are, all of them, and they're working together beautifully and intelligently.

So I must say, I had a wonderful time.

CC: So that was during your application and preparation.

RS: These are the 1960s -- 1967, at the State Federation of Planning -- whatever it is -- and we had then -- by this time the city was taking us seriously. Louis De Pascale, who did become mayor, and one of his good friends was superintendent of schools, Ray Clyons, or the principal of the school, to run the program.

GL: Mike Coleman?

RS: Mike Coleman came with Model Cities. That was Louie's choice. I was pushing this Mexican kid. Actually, Mike Coleman really was right, and he recognized that -- he said, "This guy knows what he's doing. He has all these connections in Washington. He knows what he's doing, and he's at ease with all these federal officials." And he was. Coleman was absolutely right.

GL: Good choice.

CC: Can you tell us a little bit about Project Rehab, which was a part of the Model Cities Program?

RS: Yes. Because -- back to Jane Jacobs, who was a presence. I never met her. I certainly worked with some people who have worked with her. They were all great people. But she made sense, and it was what I felt. I liked the feel of the city. People live in a place, they contend the place can't be anything because how come -- anyplace they can afford -- you know. How can that be worth anything? But all these things came to fruition, like they were waiting for us.

CC: So how did you know to bring Joe and Walter Barry to Hoboken, to help with Project Rehab?

RS: You know, they had seen -- we got the money for Ray Wright, the local builder, who was doing these terrific renovations of existing buildings -- the existing -- was it? The five-story brownstone walkup?

GL: The walkups, yes. The brick row.

RS: Ray Wright had solved all the problems, and he was doing it. And he said, "The Barrys came to one of our demonstrations. The Barrys showed up to those."

CC: And they became part of the application for Project Rehab?

RS: Not through me, but they knew how to work it. They had their hard times. They had a project that was vandalized. They started in the toughest part of Newark first, and then they changed their strategy so they had to learn the strategy for "how to renewal." We knew a rundown neighborhood.

CC: In Hoboken?

RS: Anyplace. They did it in Newark. You don't start with the toughest thing first. You weigh into that.

So there were all these facets that you learn as you go along -- the tactical facets, the political facets. Your father had such a good political head, and

also this kind of association -- he's a good salesman, too, and he can talk to Hoboken natives.

I didn't think I'd have the pleasure of talking about that experience.

GL: So Ralph, now we've gone through the Model Cities -- all of these efforts, on multiple levels, are kind of coming together, and you're involved with --

RS: The Model Cities and its predecessor, its more conventional predecessor, which was still a departure from the ultra-conventional way of doing planning.

GL: And now you're representing the planning board and you're the city planner.

RS: Yes.

GL: Can you talk a little bit about your approaches to planning that are unique to Hoboken, and some of the ingredients that went into the master planning and

ordinances for Hoboken? When was your first master plan for Hoboken?

RS: My first master plan wasn't a master plan. It was a Community Renewal Program, which was a nuts-and-bolts master plan. It's so important to point out the difference between a functional master plan, an ideologically correct master plan, and plans from -- planner-planners spend -- not planners like Walter Thabit, but a lot of the academic planners spend far too much time on what are the conventions for behaving in this kind of way -- because, after all, we're teaching it and we have to justify it. I won't be any more pointed than that.

CC: So in the 1978 master plan that I know you produced -- what did you see?

RS: The '78 master plan was a Community Renewal Program.

CC: Seventy-eight was --

RS: Did I work on it concurrently?

CC: After.

GL: I think this followed, Ralph. I think this master plan, and the youth studies that were in '77 probably preceded that, when you were working with the planning board, and when you put together this planning document.

RS: Oh, I know what I was doing. The most important --

GL: Because now you're ten years after the Model Cities designation, and a lot of this happened.

RS: The most important academic document, that is legally required in order to have a zoning ordinance that is functional, is a "land-use plan plan." It was time -- and Hoboken has its own ideas of when to be tough and when not; when you're going to have rules about something, and when you're not.

CC: So what were your goals in that particular master plan, and the land-use plan for that?

RS: To continue -- we had "nobler" ideas, and how do you bring in the various pieces that you need, in order to legalize this?

CC: What was your overall idea for the city?

RS: A low-rise city, Jane Jacobs neighborhoods.

GL: The block fabric was important.

RS: Yes. Architecture really is not my strong point, but I've worked with people whose -- like you, Grace, and Molly, who understand. And we're working toward that.

GL: But I mean at that time, Ralph, some of the goals that were set forth in this land-use plan were outgrowths of the model cities and the community renewal processes that you'd gone through.

RS: They were always floating around, but they've never been put into place where they belong.

GL: So that was the first element that precipitated being able to change the ordinance to address these things.

RS: Right.

GL: And some of the things that were unique to Hoboken, in terms of prevailing height and --

RS: Yes.

GL: Full lots, side lots, and --

RS: A lot of people have added their own sort of academic insights to the process. And Elizabeth, and Molly, and you -- on your way down the road --

GL: Oh, you are our mentor though, Ralph. You were at the start of this process, in terms of the

planning. Anyway, if you could just talk about your ideas through that.

RS: You meet the people who impress you the most in what they've done. I visited model cities. I've read the critiques of garden cities, etc., so it's a learning process; what works and what doesn't. What works and gets you where you want to go, without dividing "subdivision." You try to make the divisions as "quiet" as possible. You don't want to get derailed. I'd rather have something evolve over time, rather than say it has to be this way, because that's the only way it works. You make it seem self-limited. "That must have been your idea, sir."

CC: So what was a specific thing maybe, a goal that you had for Hoboken, when you wrote this master plan in '78?

RS: The land-use plan element was designed to serve as a legal basis for the philosophical attitudes that led us to where we were. Is that too pompous?

GL: No, no, no. I think Ralph, probably, because we're looking just for the descriptions of -- you know, some of those mechanisms that would provide the stability for the mixes of uses, for the protection of the population -- those kinds of things, that really were what you were motivated by.

RS: It takes a village to raise a child, and even to make a plan, or a good plan and planner.

CC: Do you think that the master plan was implemented after you had produced it?

RS: There were lots of forces at work in Hoboken. A lot of people --

GL: But this plan, Ralph, was -- the big change in your land-use element -- it kind of stopped the processes of urban renewal that would have precipitated it. Could you speak to that a little bit? -- what you found when you got there, in terms of the changes that came after?

RS: Well, you always find people who are sure they have the right and only way of doing something, and they're going to do it that way, and that way can be very destructive. How do you head them off at the pass? It has to be done quietly. It almost has to happen like, "Whoops! I'm sorry. I guess, that's just the way it went." You never say, "That's the way it was."

GL: Can you describe some of those things that really were a departure from that old planning, where the fabric of Hoboken was really slipping away?

RS: Joe Barry was a major force in that. It still happens. He came up with a way of doing this, and I think he did it very well -- taking some of those bulkier, older buildings, and still carrying over the feeling to them.

GL: Rehabilitation over demolition and renewal.

RS: Yes.

CC: So Ralph, what do you think was your greatest success in Hoboken?

RS: Not going to jail. [Laughter]

GL: I don't think that was your greatest success in Hoboken.

But no, talk about what was accomplished. I think there was a lot accomplished in Hoboken.

RS: Look. It's a city I've always loved. It's always ranked very high. It feels -- oh. This never gets enough credit. I used it a lot in the beginning, because it was powerful -- that Regional Plan Association study of the lower Hudson waterfront. Carlyle Towner did that one, and it's a beautifully -- you know, the last authentic seaport town on the Hudson. Boy, that's a good credential to go to war with. So it was that kind of -- but, you know, it comes from coming into planning, and into the Clam Broth House, tired and wet and whatever, and getting warm, and talking to people, and the ease of talking to people. I've been trying to -- Oh, well. I've been trying to talk about hitchhiking in the United States

to this friend in England, and I don't think she understands how much people's attitudes are important. During the times that planning was looked on with favor, there was this hugely generous attitude on the part of the people who picked people up. It takes two to tango. She must have thought I was -- I don't know if she understood it, but I got a ride once -- the Merchant Marine used to get dumped on by everybody. The Coast Guard -- who never went offshore -- "Oh, what do you guys know? You get paid," and all that kind of thing. Our salaries stopped if the ship got sunk. So there was all that stuff.

So when I got a ride with an American fighter pilot who had volunteered to fly in the Battle of Britain -- you had to be crazy to do that. You had to have a death wish, and here's this guy -- as modest as he can be (and I've found that again, and again; that very often the people who do the real stuff are also modest about it) --

GL: I'm hearing that, too, because we're not talking very much about your accomplishments, and there were certainly many. But of some of the things that happened, Ralph, under your kind of guidance, in terms of

planning in Hoboken, what are you the happiest about? What do you feel is the most successful?

RS: See, I think we got to do a lot of things. I didn't know how many of them would become permanent, or were understood -- or will they ever be understood?

RS: Or will they ever be used properly. When you think about the way the De Fazios ran the Housing Authority. They're never going to understand what I meant about Hoboken -- and they won't "tolerate it."

CC: But a lot of the things that you proposed actually got implemented, like saving the housing stock.

GL: Protection, for a long time, Ralph, of some of the special business areas on the waterfront, and overlay zoning, and some of those strategies that you put into place that offered a lot of protection.

RS: I've never considered myself knowledgeable.

CC: Ralph, when did you stop working in Hoboken?

RS: In 1994.

CC: And what have you been doing since then?

RS: Not a lot, really. In 1994 I was -- what? I was seventy-two years old.

RS: What I found more rewarding at that point was teaching, which I did at Hunter. I had classes. I had one lecture class, which, at its lowest, semester after semester, would have been 150 people. So multiply that by twenty, and it gets to be a lot of people. But they are the kind of people that I think have to be brought into a feeling, or work -- a kind of work -- what are the gratifications of the work? What is possible for you to do? Who can we bring to you to show you who is doing things that change a place?

You're talking about me -- there are these terrific people here and there who are doing these things. I want the kids to see them and know about them. The MC should not be talking about himself in this. He should say, "Look at this. Look at this man. Look at this one. Look at this young group here." That's what. So I found teaching, at that point, very rewarding. I began to find local planning -- since I was making the opinion -- too opinionated, too protective.

CC: At that time, in the middle '90s, right?

RS: It probably always has been. And why wasn't I still working for Hoboken? Well, I was a friend of an enemy of the mayor. Russo didn't like Tom what's-his-name?

GL: "Vezzetti?"

RS: No, no. No. The other Tom -- the woodworker.

GL: Newman.

RS: Newman. I was a friend of Tom Newman. Russo was not. So I committed the cardinal sin. I was outspoken in a political way. Then I took my solace from teaching, which -- I loved the kids. They were "heartbreaking," and they came from every neighborhood in New York and from neighborhoods all over the world. I just loved that kind of contact.

CC: How long did you teach, then, after you left Hoboken in 1994? A few years?

RS: I had my heart attack in October, 1999.

CC: Oh. So you taught for five years.

RS: Yes.

CC: And since then what have you been doing?

RS: Hidden.

CC: Okay. Well, you've hidden in a beautiful place.

One more thing I want to ask you -- how do you feel about what has happened in Hoboken since you left?

RS: I think it's very difficult to make anything permanent about a city. It gets too precious. The dynamic -- they have to respond in different ways to different times, to different pressures. All those things. So if at a certain period I made an impact that made -- who are the beneficiaries? People like "Kathy de Palma," a sweet lady, whose house became worth lots of money -- and she deserved it. So I don't know what I contributed; I got a lot of satisfaction. I had a lucky run. I worked with wonderful people. I had an amazing collection of people, and I guess maybe those mystiques about the crap tables are right -- when you're on a roll, do it. But I was lucky.

CC: So are you still in on the development that's occurred around the perimeter of Hoboken?

RS: No.

GL: You went to Hoboken within the last year or so, right, Ralph? You saw some of the high-rises and some of the big-block developments?

RS: I really didn't ever see very much, because by that time I was already becoming a "fragile passenger."

GL: Gotcha. Gotcha.

CC: So do you have any other comments about Hoboken you want to make? If not --

RS: Well, I can just say what so many people -- from the former pastor at Smith College, to the hostess who ran that lovely establishment with friendly old women in "Havana" -- I had a wonderful time in Hoboken once.

CC: Well, Ralph, we want to thank you so much. We really appreciate your taking the time to share your memories and your thoughts about Hoboken with us. Thank you so much.