INTERVIEWEE: Nathaniel A. Owings (Side #1)

INTERVIEWER: Joe B. Frantz

March 25, 1970

F: This is an interview with Mr. Nathaniel A. Owings at his home in Big Sur, California, on March 25, 1970. The interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

Let's start off, Nat, and talk about--I presume before 1960 you did not know the Johnsons. Did you have anything to do with the Kennedy's prior to that?

O: No, I didn't I didn't know either one.

F: So you come into this part of service in the 1960's with John F. Kennedy and the Pennsylvania Commission.

O: Pennsylvania Avenue Council.

F: Let's talk a little bit about the formation of that.

O: I didn't have any connection with any presidential candidates or anybody aspiring to same. The first time that we really heard about the Kennedys was when we got invited--Skid and I--to the Inaugural. They were inviting architects and artists and poets, etc.

Then after the inaugural I got word from ~~David~~ Daniel Patrick Moynihan that I be made chairman of the council for the design of Pennsylvania Avenue, which was set up by Kennedy on the recommendation of Arthur Goldberg, who had headed up a presidential ad hoc committee designed to set some policies for the nation as to the architectural standards of the country, with particular emphasis on the Capitol itself.

F: We've been redoing the Capitol ever since it was begun, but I presume most of--

O: Since 1802.

F: But most of those efforts have really not had much thrust behind them

O: That sounds like one of those questions from the jury. I would say that the judge should throw him out for question because it's a leading question with the answer in the question.

That isn't true. They have had a couple of very strong basic redesign attempts on Pennsylvania Avenue--on the Mall. The first one was, believe it or not, by Alexander Jackson Downing. And Alexander Jackson Downing was a landscape architect who lived on the Hudson, up north of New York City. He was very young but very bright and he believed in the fundamental principle of the English garden--the informal business, and he really had it screwed up. He was hired and was getting along fine, Arthur was President. It's the only thing I ever heard that Arthur did. But the guy had it all made. But fortunately, riding on Fulton's Steamboat, it blew up. And this is the greatest thing that ever happened to the history of the Washington Mall and Pennsylvania Avenue because that was the end of his design and the only thing left of his design is the Elipse in front of the White House.

There was a very strong influence on the Mall there through the thrust that he had exerted towards what one calls a Gothic Victorian riverboat--Hudson River style--and that's what the Smithsonian Institution's main building, the Castle, is. It's that wonderful crenulated jigsaw red brick confection. Andrew

Jackson Downing thought that was dandy. That was a strong thrust because if successful it would have destroyed completely the thing that L'Enfant had in mind which is also pseudo, semi--really French Renaissance, not Roman Greek--not Roman Greek--, but Renaissance, which is quite different. L'Enfant's stuff came really from Versailles, not from Rome. Then the sentimentalists came along, this was before the Civil War, and through Downing almost wrecked L'Enfant's start. The elipse is great, actually.

Then during the Civil War the whole Mall was used for supply depots and hospitals, and all the leading whorehouses were established on the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue. After the Civil War nothing much happened to change things except the Pennsylvania Railroad was put in crossing the Mall--(interruption)

O: Where was I?

F: We had come into the Civil War.

O: Then there was another hell of a thrust, and that came from Burnham--Daniel H. Burnham, famous Chicago architect--and his efforts were publicized in a couple of wonderful books. His thrust was to go back to Rome, and this was inspired by the 1893 Chicago World's Fair; which is another story. He was the most important architect in the country, and he is often quoted as making no little plans. The so-called McMillan Commission, with him as Chairman, and McKim and LaFarge, went to work. They really laid out the damndest plan you ever saw, it was a direct copy of Augustinian Rome and would have looked like the thing Nero was fiddling over when Rome burned. It was really terrific. Over-

done, elaborate, ostentatious, it was just the opposite in its expression from what we think of as appropriate for our Capitol today. Everything was wrong about it. It was grandiose, false, as if everybody should wear a toga; but Burnham did one major thing. Through his close friendship with the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, he got rid of the railroad which crossed the Mall to Pennsylvania Avenue. That's about the only major physical thing that happened out of that planning. But it was worth the effort just to get rid of the railroad tracks. But the thrust of his elaborate plans was the powerful classic design which stayed with the successive planners until the day I became involved as Chairman of the 1962 Commission.

In fact, when I took over as Chairman the official plan still called for the demolition of the Smithsonian Institution's red brick castle, which today we consider the keystone of the Mall complex.

F: But when you moved in you had not really moved forward in a half-century, but you had the feeling at this time that this was a serious effort, that this wasn't just window dressing?

O: I didn't really think about it very much; I've been involved all my life as an architect, and in almost everything I've ever done there were some aspects which were involved in the central core of Washington. When you're given the chance to work on the most Scared Central area of your country's Capitol you don't really worry too much about what the hell is going to happen to your effort. I had a marvelous boss. President Kennedy was young,

full of vinegar, and regardless of whether you're a Democrat or a Republican, you had to admit that he was in there full of vim and vigor, ready to back our efforts. We were a fresh committee--council, a wonderful group of people on the council by the way, made up of a cross-section of disciplines. There was Fritz Gutheim, an architectural historian of note--there was Pat Moynihan, who was then a lowly assistant Secretary of Labor, under Arthur Goldberg, but a brilliant, imaginative member--we had Bill Walton who was an artist and a great confidant of the President; Doug Haskell, an old time, long time, Architecture Editor and Publisher of the Architectual Forum. Instead of being stuck with the usual narrow cadre of architects who speak only to themselves, we had a broad spectrum of the relevant disciplines which gave broad perspective to the challenge of doing an in depth solution to a problem still unsolved after 190 years....

F: Did President Kennedy give you a person in charge on this?

O: Our house mother, I used to call her, or den mother, was Elizabeth Rowe.

F: Jim Rowe's wife.

O: Jim Rowe's wife, and she was chairman of the Planning Commission. She had a special way about her. She arranged that we met in the Fish Room and the President came in and saw us and gave us a pat on the back.

One thing I forgot to tell you was that the reason that the Burnham plan failed to gain the support of Congress was that he worked only with McMillan, the Senator, and when the plan got all

set ready to go the House said, "To hell with you. The Senate isn't going to tell us what to do." So we were pretty well aware of the need to keep the Congress apprised.

We got our charge from President Kennedy. Then we were taken to lunch in the Senate dining room by Senator Bible, who was the head of the Interior Committee. We then took a bus tour up and down the Avenue. At that time I didn't have anything to do with the Mall. I was determined to make something out of this. I'd been through a good many different kinds of things in my life, involving lost causes and working from one's boot straps, and I decided I was going to see to it that this one did not fail. We didn't have very much money to start with. We had $75,000.

I met with my committee under Mrs. Rowe's aegis. I remember I said, and it was quoted around the country pretty much when I was given the appointment and photographed and so on, I said, "Kennedy is really the second President of the United States who has shown any interest in Washington. The first one was Jefferson." So I thought with that kind of reception we had a good chance.

I suggested to each one of these men that they go home and think things over for three months. I gave them three months because this was in June, summer, and I thought we'd come back in September, the fall. And I wanted each one to come back with an individual solution to the problem of how they, if they were all by themselves, approaching it only from the point of view

of their discipline, would design the Avenue.

So in September we had this meeting, and it was tremendous. Each one of them came out with something very effective and very strong, some of them were words, others were plans and pictures. Paul Thiry of Seattle, who was later a member of the National Capitol Planning Commission, had prepared the strongest idea of all. He had discovered that there was a twenty-foot drop between F and G streets and Pennsylvania Avenue. Using this twenty-foot change in level we could cross E Street twenty feet above street level from F and G, to balconies on Pennsylvania Avenue. This freed E Street of pedestrian traffic and we could use it as a rapid transit, mass transit, artery for automobiles and buses, permitting a pedestrian crossing over onto the mezzanines of our buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue, free of traffic.

This idea stuck, and we've incorporated it in our plans. This meant that we had an inexpensive way of separating the traffic between the pedestrian and the motor traffic made possible by the natural terrain. We started out on a basis of individual input and it was very successful. Our Council worked together beautifully. Most of our meetings were in saloons and in the back of the Occidental Restaurant. We didn't have enough money for an office. We'd all get a little crocked and sit down and have a good bull session, then we began to draw up the plans.

We finally arrived at a plan which we turned over to the President in 1962--Kennedy was following this closely. One of my close friends was Adlai Stevenson, who was, I remember, in the

White House the day that we showed it to President Kennedy. He just happened to be there. I didn't know President Kennedy well, I'd only seen him three times in my life. But he was stimulating to be with, he got excited about the plan and I suppose everybody says this, but it's true in our case, he actually told us that day that the day when he got back from Texas he was going to have what he called a coffee party and bring in the leaders of the House and the Senate and sell our plan to them.

F: No, not everybody says it.

O: Don't they? I thought this was the kind of thing you do--you know, you're always the guy that didn't make the plane that crashed!

F: Not in this case.

O: In this case, he actually--I think it was Thursday that he was assassinated and Friday he was going to meet with us. Of course the thing was traumatic for everybody, but especially traumatic for Pat Moynihan who was pretty close to him and so was Walton.

F: Had you by this time decided on that offset principle--?

O: Yes. We had the plan, we had the model, and we were using our own funds a good bit because we were not about to let this drop. We had our plan all set up and a beautiful model built.

F: The reason for the background of course is then you, in effect, inherited a new President, rather than his inheriting you. How soon did you get going again on this? Had you had any contact at all with Johnson during this period?

O: None whatsoever. It didn't seem like I was going to make one. The impression I got was that the fact that this was artistic, that it had to do with the aesthetic, that it was strongly supported by Kennedy, was going to put the absolute kibosh on it and we weren't going to get anywhere at all. I never got a letter of any kind, for a long time, never even got a letter accepting our plan.--I have to go back:

When the assassination occurred, we decided then the thing we had to do was to get out a firm report recording our efforts.

Another wonderful person we had as an advisor was Charles Horsky, White House advisor to us. He was one of the key people. He was with Kennedy. He's a member of one of the largest firms of lawyers in Washington, and one of the old-line ones. They're very much of the Republican kind of establishment, but he's a liberal. He was the assistant to the President in charge of civic affairs for Washington.

Johnson kept him in office. In an effort to firm up our efforts on the Avenue we got out what we called the Green Book, which is a magnificent report. It's really well done. We got 5,000 copies out, we nursed it right through. The quality is high, the Government Printing agency did it, it's beautiful.

F: Did you have a budget for this, or are you doing it on your own?

O: No, we had a budget. This was within the $75,000. I think it cost us maybe $15,000 or $20,000, something like that. It was done by the Government Printing Office. We did all the art work ourselves and wrote the report ourselves. The thing was so

beautifully done. We sent one to every member of Congress, to which I might add I'm convinced that 90 percent of those books were never read by anybody; I don't think Congressmen have time to look at anything much. We learned this. The only way you're going to get a congressman to know what you're talking about is to tell him personally and then they respond in very positive ways.

Then President Johnson finally wrote me a letter thanking me very much for carrying out the direction of the Pennsylvania Avenue Council.

F: Do you think he saw the report?

O: I think you'd have to ask somebody else. I don't know whether he did or not. I don't think it makes a hell of a lot of difference whether he did or not, because very shortly after that--let's don't get ahead of the story because I don't think Mrs. Johnson had come into the picture yet.

This report was very good, and I got my cursory letter of thanks from the President. He was pretty busy. So we were dead. But I claimed that I wasn't dead for the simple reason that we had a report out and I was the editor of it, and, therefore, I was still in business as long as the book was in circulation, and we continued to promote the idea that we wanted to get something done--some action from the present administration.

And about the same time the Editor of Look got hold of me and said they'd like to feature the Pennsylvania Avenue plan in a conservation issue they were going to have, I've forgotten

what the date on it was.

F: It was Look's initiative, not yours?

O: Look's initiative, not mine. But they said, "I want you to get some official to go with you." I said, "What the hell! The most important official I can think of would be Stewart Udall; his interest lay in that area." So he agreed to do this. I didn't know Udall up to that point.

We had the beautiful model of Pennsylvania Avenue--it was right after the inaugural of President Johnson, I remember this because the photographer put the model up on the top of the reviewing stands, about 35 feet in the air, and they lined it up with the Avenue, so that Pennsylvania Avenue on the model was lined up with the Avenue itself--and at the end of the Avenue, where our model of the Capitol dome was, there was the big dome in the round. We waited for sunset, and the photographer had Udall's and my heads peering over the model.

The article suggested that this predicted the future of the Avenue.

While we were sitting up there and the wind was blasting our tails off, Udall said: "I'm going to have to get somebody to redesign the Mall. Who do you think I ought to get?" I said, "Well, I think I could solve that problem for you pretty easily."

So from that moment on, the natural boundaries were expanded to include the whole of the sacred enclave of the National Capitol.

F: Really, you had a problem, didn't you, if you tried to do them separately?

O: One couldn't really do it.

F: Wasn't there an overlap?

O: One couldn't draw an arbitrary line at any point. But it was not normal for the government to ever do anything so sensible. But it was thrilling to be able to deal with such an important area in one complete whole. Our firm could not be paid for any private jobs on Pennsylvania Avenue, but we could be on the Mall. So that also gave us a small economic return for a part of this work.

F: Why could you in one case and not in the other?

O: Because I was chairman of a presidential council in the one case; I was a private consultant to the National Park Service in the other.

Although President Johnson was not interested, Charlie Horsky and Pat Moynihan worked very hard to get him to establish a commission, at lease a temporary commission, on Pennsylvania Avenue. They finally did get the President to issue an executive order creating the temporary commission on Pennsylvania Avenue.

F: Horsky was your line into the White House at this time?

O: Horsky and Goldberg. Arthur Goldberg by that time was a Supreme Court Judge and not able to do much to help.

F: Johnson did, then unappointed him.

O: Then he got him to resign.

F: To go to the United Nations, yes.

O: President Kennedy had appointed Goldberg Secretary of Labor in the first place.

Anyway, Johnson, at the instigation of Stewart Udall, made the executive order and created our commission and then Udall and Horsky helped to get a permanent law passed by the House and the Senate, and got a bill up on it. For some reason known only to Representative John Saylor of Pennsylvania, twice it was supposed to go through on a consent motion and twice Saylor knocked it down. It went through the Senate each time; but an enabling legislation never made it in the House. Through Aspinall, the bill reached the floor the second year, but on the objection of John Saylor, a Republican congressman who is the minority head of the Department of Interior and Insular Affairs Committee of the House, it was dropped...

F: And no one ever overrode Saylor on this?

O: No one even tried. Enough to have a House vote. To do that the Rules Committee had to give the bill a place on the calendar and by that time things were all messed up. Carl Albert had a heart attack; and so we never got it.

F: Did Mrs. Johnson get in on this with you?

O: Yes. That was the other exciting thing because, I don't remember the dates exactly although I could find them all, suddenly one day in Washington I got a call at the Hay-Adams--I went back to the hotel for some reason--

F: In Washington?

O: In Washington. I always stay at the Hay-Adams, and I went back at 10:30 in the morning, which I just ordinarily never do, and there was this telephone call from the White House, from Mrs. Johnson. Liz Carpenter came on the phone and said, "I want you to come right over and bring a Pennsylvania Avenue book with you." That was the one time I couldn't find a copy. I looked everywhere. Finally I got somebody in Charlie Horsky's office to bring one down.

I was invited up to the second floor in the Yellow Sitting Room. Mrs. Johnson and Liz Carpenter sat there and I went over the whole Pennsylvania Avenue with them. I remember particularly she was interested in the picture of the poplars that Jefferson planted along the avenue. I remember her saying, "Well, now, isn't that interesting, poplars don't last!" And then she asked me to join her Committee for the Beautification of Washington, D.C. which, as you remember, became a national effort, and a successful one, to make beauty a household word.

F: Was there an attempt to coordinate all of this, or were you really running two or three different little operations?

O: Mrs. Johnson and Liz Carpenter coordinated their committees completely--I treated the plan for the Pennsylvania Avenue and the Mall, or rather the Federal Enclave, separately in one way and together in all regional problems.

F: I'm thinking about her beautification though, which is entirely different.

O: It wasn't really different--since beauty is the basis for all. But it was completely coordinated with her. I provided one of her staple entertainment features. In other words she had to have some vaudeville, you know, from time to time to entertain, and I saw to it that I got in there about once every three months with a full-fledged show.

I'll never forget the third time that I was scheduled to show the Avenue and I said to Liz just before I went on, "What would you think I could do to my presentation to make it more interesting," and she said, "Make it shorter."

I'll always remember a dialogue with Walter Washington--in those days he was in charge of public housing in Washington; he had the great slum areas, the blacks, and the ghettos and such, and I had these magnificent public spaces and he kept saying, "All the money goes to your kind of thing and I don't get any." I finally made a deal with him, I said, "After all, your blacks have to go some place for relaxation and entertainment, let's make this an acceptable place regardless of race, creed, or religion, and it may spread to their own areas!" And he agreed!

I'd say that the central focus for the whole effort was Lady Bird's committee. And I'll go further and say, as I have in my book on The American Aesthetic, that I believe that the impact of her efforts was one of the greatest, most permanent things that came out of the administration. She made it respectable to talk about a simple tulip bulb--beauty--pride in one's own place.

I'll never forget the first time that District Superintendent Sutton Jett and I were standing in the garden at the White House. We were supposed to go out in the middle of the Mall and plant two pots of pansies. There was a group of TV camermen and I said to Sutton Jett--he was about six foot six--I said: "You know, I don't know whether this is so good, you and me planting potted pansies on the Mall. I just don't think this is the kind of thing men are going to like." But we did and Mrs. Johnson made all of this seem good, and pretty soon everyone was planting pansies.

The cooperation was complete. We got a hell of a lot of features incorporated into that Mall and Pennsylvania Avenue plan. We didn't lose a month on the plan, and we couldn't have done it without access to Mrs. Johnson. For example, we got the six and a half acre Reflecting Pool in front of the Capitol which is one of the items--I don't know how you want to organize this presentation here, I mean this talk you and I are having--is this all right?

F: This is fine.

O: One end of the Avenue terminated in front of the Capitol, the other end in front of the Treasury beside the White House; these two termini are important. Anything physical or mental must have a beginning and an end. And in a plan, just like an idea or a sentence, you have to have a beginning and an end. So here in Washington at the nation's Capitol we wanted to have a fitting terminus in front of the Capitol. Of course, we had no money, but we did know that the Congress, through their leader of the House

in those days, Sam Rayburn, had insisted that the freeway that was planned to be put underground in front of the Capitol was to be curved to miss a number of trees. This worried the engineers, because they hated to curve a freeway and they dreaded the cost and the danger inherent in such a curve. So I was told by the Federal highway engineer and the District Engineer, a Brigadier General, that if I could get that freeway design straightened out, and God knows he had little hope that I could pull it off--"I'll give you the savings in cost between the two freeways, the curved one and the straight one, for you to use to build your reflecting pool." That was about three and a half million dollars in savings involved.

So I said, "All right."

As I always did when I had a problem, I went to Mrs. Johnson. She had endorsed our plan for the pool. In getting an endorsement of the plan by her the newspapers are of course a marvelous form of contract. When you get all those newspaper photographers and reporters standing there in the White House Rose Garden and they say to Mrs. Johnson, "Do you like this plan," and she says, "This is a lovely plan," and pictures of her smiling and saying that, that's just like a contract in your file. You can say, "See, she approves it."

I went up to the Speaker of the House, Mr. McCormack, an old friend of Mrs. Johnson. I had a roll of drawings a foot thick. I was going to show him the whole thing. I said, "I'm here at Mrs. Johnson's suggestion, Mr. Speaker. I want to show you my proposals for this Reflecting Pool in front of the Congress."

He said, "Does Mrs. Johnson like it?" I said, "She does. I'm authorized to tell you that she approves it completely and recommends it." He said, "Never mind those drawings. Where do I sign?"

So within a half-hour, on a scruffy little piece of paper on which we had the layout of the straightened freeway and pool drawn out, just the basics of it, McCormack got hold of Humphreys and they both signed it, and then he got the Majority and Minority leaders of the House and Senate--we had six signatures on there in twenty or thirty minutes. And there we had it. I was in a dream.

So then I took it back and showed it to the General and the Federal Highway Engineer, Rex Whitten. Again, of course, I didn't have a contract nor did I have any way to get a contract because, in the first place, this was a Federal highway paid for 90 percent by the Federal Bureau of Public Roads. We were all in the mayor's office--it wasn't the mayor's office then, we didn't have a mayor yet, it was the office of the president of their District Council. He went to Ireland as the ambassador later. We were sitting in there and Rex Whitten of the Bureau of Public Roads said, "Sorry, Nat, there's no such thing as a savings in government, you know. You should have done it the cheapest way in the first plan; therefore, you don't have a savings and can't have your pool, but thanks."

I said, "Now wait a minute, Rex. You made a deal, you're going to live up to it; and if you don't I'll just tear this little piece of paper up." He said, "Oh, no, don't do that." I said, "All right, then let's have a press release on it to seal our agreement."

So before TV and reporters, the General and Rex Whitten make a public statement as to our agreement. That's the only contract we ever had.

F: Did you have any conflict of interest at all there, not so much a conflict of interest as just a conflict of jurisdiction with the fact that that is the National Capitol Region Park Service.

O: No. John Saylor was watching out for that. Stewart Udall immediately invited me to become a member of the National Advisory Board, to the Secretary of the Interior. Through this new avenue of historic authority I set wheels in motion to get the area of Pennsylvania Avenue and the Mall designated as a National Historic Site. The fact that it wasn't one is kind of ridiculous. What area could be more historic! Another funny thing on that, I considered that it was fairly historic and I kind of felt the White House had been there for some time and I could prove it. But no, when you get to the Park Service, they wanted ninety man months to find out whether this was a historic site. No way--I needed it tomorrow!

So I decided to do the research through the Pennsylvania Avenue Commission.

We desperately needed some sort of official status, in lieu of--lack of government approval in the Congress, so Stewart Udall got an executive order out of President Johnson naming the Pennsylvania Avenue area a national historic site. I think that's one of the reasons John Saylor pursued me so relentlessly because we got this through without the approval of Congress.

As a national historic site, all of it, tied together, we always treated the entire area as a unit; and our drawings always include both.

F: On the north side of Pennsylvania, you had just a tremendous amount of junk. Did this have any political clout or economic clout at all, or were these an unorganized sort of the first group?

O: One never knows for sure. The reactions were diverse. I'll never know whether, for example,Saylor's opposition stemmed from, we'll say, the Occidental Restaurant or Kahn's store or what. But we had very few of the usual objections. We didn't have any domestic housing to deal with. We had few good buildings. Kahn's Department Store, which was probably the best, was covered by simply a thin sheet of aluminum siding on old broken down buildings. What was happening was the flight of business down Connecticut Avenue, and in our area there just wasn't any building going on. It was really tragic, still is. There just isn't any life on the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue.

An interesting thing, when we started work on the Avenue the going rate for sale per square foot of land quoted on the north side was $30 a square foot. Within one year it was up to $125 a square foot. Today you really can't buy it--at any price--and no one really wants to buy--it's a stalemate.

F: Did the Willard give you a problem?

O: The Willard (Hotel) was one of our worst problems.

F: Did you ever consider saving it?"

O: Yes. As I say about the Willard, the Willard is an old name but not an old building. In the first place a lot of people think that Lincoln and different people slept there. They didn't. The only thing that's there is the plaque. Here, again, gets back to fundamental city planning. I felt from the beginning that we were demonstrating treatments for model cities. We were actually doing what people were merely talking about in other places, and I believe that just as an Indian pueblo you have a square, I think that one of the terminals of the area should be a plaza or a square and that's why I wanted a square in front of the Treasury and the White House. And that's why I wanted to get rid of the Willard and the Washington Hotel, and produce a clear vista there so that you could see the old Treasury Building,which is a beautiful building; to then open up the Avenue to the business dictrict of F and G streets so that they become a viable economic unit tied in to the central Mall and Avenue for visitors to us. (later it has been decided to keep the Willard) August 11, 1975.

F: Did Mayor Washington ever buy the idea that this might revitalize downtown?

O: He bought it all the way, and he supported it as much as he could. The City of Washington up until recently has a faceless situation. The people who run Washington--the Congress!--don't live there; and the people who live there don't or can't run it.

It has all been very interesting, but I moved along very slowly. We had brush fires all the time, we had great crises, we got the

private enterprise Presidential building built, you know, with a set back. One of the big gains on the Avenue that we seem to have established is the 75 foot set back of all buildings on the north side.

We had a major problem with the new F.B.I. building at 7th and 9th and the Avenue. We needed cooperation from J. Edgar Hoover, who was supposed to be impossible to get at. I tried the only stunt that nobody ever tried with him apparently. I called him direct on the phone. I don't think anybody had ever called up J. Edgar Hoover direct before. And got him, not even a secretary in between.

F: You can't do that, I've tried it.

O: He agreed to see me, I went up there, and he brought in his two key deputies. They were interested and finally I proved to them that their building could be improved to everyone's benefit.

F: That's the new one that's going up across from the Archives?

O: Yes. They didn't seem to realize that half of their show is a public world's fair, it's a kid's fair. Every kid wants to be an F.B.I. agent! They were showing me some stiffs that they's dug up in some swamp in Mississippi that day, and it was just before lunch, and I asked them if they wouldn't wait until after lunch to show me these decayed cadavers. But while we were looking at these products of their diligence, here were the kids coming by seemingly by the thousands. So I suggested, "Look, we can divide your new building so that the front part is a demonstration place; the back part will be locked off for your serious work." They

were grateful for that. Then we got them to move the entire structure back 75 feet and give us that set back we wanted on the Avenue, but we couldn't have done that if we hadn't shown them a more efficient way to use their space because although they had unlimited funds we had a limited amount of volume on the Avenue within which to work.

Our other problem was this private building sector and the first case was the Raleigh Hotel site. This private developer agreed to move back voluntarily; giving up 5,000 square feet of space at $125 a square foot. That's quite something.

So I feel that if I dropped dead tomorrow and no more push was made on the plans we still basically have the plan in business because, among other things, I've got the Willard traded over--it's going to be traded for a surplus air force base on Staten Island. No money needed, see, so you get that done anyway. (This didn't go through.) August 11, 1975.

F: Did President Johnson ever show any personal interest in what you were doing?

O: Not to me. But I made the statement that we never got any support out of him one day, and Charlie Horsky said, "That isn't true. You did." He did create the Pennsylvania Avenue Commission. This is the Commission, now, not the council. And Lady Bird gave more attention and time than anybody else in Washington, so I'd say that the Johnson family supported the project all the way through.

F: You had the feeling that through her then, you could get to the top if necessary--or when you got there, you were there!

O: Yes, but I had a feeling that there were a lot of things she couldn't do or didn't feel she should do, but the fact that when I got there, I was there is right. Her beneficent support was enough to keep us going even without Congressional support.

Also, each branch of government had money for special things. For example, on our commission were cabinet officers, the secretaries of six of the different branches of government--the Secretary of the Interior; Secretary of Treasury; Commerce; HUD; HEW; and the Attorney General. We gave special luncheons every three months or so. Once at the Octagon and the Blair House and the Decatur House with candlelight and silverware. We had a rule, no substitutes and no observers.

In government Cabinet officers almost always send their deputies or they send an observer. I remember once the Secretary of Treasury called and said, "Nat, I just can't come. Can I send an observer?" I said, "No, sorry." He said, "What are you going to do at the meeting?" I said, "These things are going to be so important, you just can't miss." Well, he showed up. In other words, the word got around that this was quick and easy and the food and drinks were good, and also it was interesting.

We had complete support from the various secretaries. They loaned us people, they loaned time, they gave us pretige.

F: You've got this problem in Washington of bridges and of cross traffic etc., the fact of whether you use subways. Did this come in your purview or did this work independently of what you were trying to do?

O: No, I was involved in such for different reasons. I figured that anything involving physical planning that went on in Washington was important to the Avenue. One of the advantages of being the chairman of a commission appointed by the President is that you can go anywhere, see anybody--and so I circulated freely. I was very much interested in the subway situation, because I wanted to institute a new practice in subways, also I wanted to control the automobile.

For example,Stewart Udall was asked to give approval for putting a surface freeway across the Tidal Basin. He asked me one cold, rainy morning, I remember, to go out and look at it and see if I thought it would damage the Tidal Basin. This was very early in the game. I was fairly new in Washington. I went out there on the Basin--the wind was blowing, I could hardly see for the sleet, and I just took one look at the area and I felt--what a shame, one shouldn't intrude on this rare holy spot. It should be stopped. I don't know why or how, but no!

The Federal Highway Commission was about to let contracts for a hundred million dollar system. Stewart called it off and gave me time, and I ended up with Rex Whitten with an approval on a tunnel a mile long underneath the Tidal Basin which eliminated the need for all those bridges and concrete intrusions in the Basin.

F: Did you coordinate with this L'Enfant Plaza that has gone in there?

O: Not really. We didn't know much about that. That was an Urban Renewal Project. It was almost impossible to coordinate with Urban Renewal. Of course, I coordinated later very much so with General Quesada. That was a beautiful project.

F: Did you yourself come up with the idea of the National Plaza?

O: Oh, yes, and I have lived to almost regret it--I have been called a Russian Commisar!

F: That's your baby?

O: I am afraid so. I wanted the so called national square at the Treasury. One at Market Square. It was, of course, very much of a joint venture.

F: You foundered in Congress. Where did that leave you? Have you been discharged officially?

O: I should have foundered but refused. For about three or four years we kept getting our money anyway. Mrs. Hanson and Senator Bible saw to it we got our $87,500. But this last Congress, Saylor saw to it that our money, which had been approved by both the Senate and the House, was cancelled. They took it out. At that point the President took us on.

F: President Nixon?

O: Yes. We are now being paid by his office, and our offices are over in GSA, and anachronistically we're much more close. I'm a democrat and have no real connection. We're much closer to the administration than we were in the Johnson Administration. Isn't that strange?

F: But he's showing an equivalent interest in this?

O: More so. The plan now is to make it the central focus for the Bicentennial in '76. Moynihan, of course, has increased in stature, and his influence is greater. Nixon himself, I had an hour and fifteen minute presentation with him in his Cabinet in the Cabinet Room, which is more than I ever had with (President Johnson).

End of Side One

INTERVIEWEE: NATHANIEL OWINGS (Side #2)

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

March 25, 1970.

F: Okay, we've increased Moynihan's stature.

O: And the President himself was interested enough to let me present it to him, and took an hour and fifteen minutes, which is quite a lot of time. So I think that it's a logical procedure and development to turn it into the Bicentennial program for the Capitol---

F: You really feel that this has grown beyond any partisanship, and it's just a matter of working out your timing and funding?

O: Sure. As a matter of fact, when I presented it to Nixon, I said, "You realize, Mr. President that the last important work here was done by Hoover. President Hoover built the south side and the federal triangle--why don't you get busy and do the north side?" I said also, "I think it's about time that you had something to do besides the hard work and worry. This is fun. You just come out of the White House and give us a little sidewalk superintending." And he is enthusiastic about it, and it's the only project that he really, according to Moynihan and Peter Flanagan--according to their stories, he really likes it so much that he considers it fun and not work.

I haven't been anomalous as far as political parties are concerned. I was considered a black Republican all through the Democratic period and now I'm considered a black Democrat in the Republican period.

F: You're always associating with the wrong people.

O: Always in the wrong place, which I enjoy thoroughly.

F: Did you run into any militancy on this, on the fact that--you mentioned Walter Washington earlier--but into some really stiff opposition on the fact that money ought to go into the ghetto and not into the improvement of Washington?

O: In principle, yes--always--but Walter Washington realized that the two were inseparable. We never got to the point where anybody gave us any money anyway, so it couldn't make any difference. If we used funds it was trust funds out of the highways, or like that savings we did, or like the FBI money or the Labor money. Unfortunately, or fortunately, we never got to the position where we had any money that the poor blacks could get anyway.

F: To shift a moment, your firm is building the LBJ Library and companion building and Gordon Bunshaft has primary responsibility for that. On something like that, do you come into it, or without demeaning you, are you just window dressing in this case?

O: I object violently to the word "window dressing." SOM got that job through my work in Washington and Mrs. Johnson.

F; Good, I like you violent.

O: I'd like to say that one of the most exciting things that happened to me was getting acquainted with Mrs. Johnson. I am senior founding partner of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. Bunshaft is one of our partners in design. The way that whole LBJ library started was through Dillon Ripley and Hirshhorn. Dillon was interested in getting Hirshhorn to move his collection to Washington. To do that Dillon

needed a building site on the Mall. That wasn't so easy to come by. So I worked very closely with Mrs. Johnson and Dillon Ripley on that since the Mall was my responsibility. I proposed an underground solution for Mr. Hirshhorn, but he didn't like being put underground.

F: You're talking about the Hirshhorn thing?

O: Yes. So I pulled in Bunshaft. Then, when the library came up, Brooks who is a Texan architect of great charm and considerable influence, and lives down there and knows the Johnsons very well, and he had been to school with Bun. So Brooks and I agreed that Bunshaft could do both. Now in our firm when we delegate work, we delegate it. I might also say no one tells Bunshaft anything. We're doing work all over the United States, huge volumes, several billions of dollars worth, and it gives many fine designers a chance to do fine work. So I have not been involved in it. My responsibility was overall planning--Bunshaft's detail design. I usually don't hear from things in SOM until something goes wrong, then I sure as hell am responsible. But nothing has gone wrong yet on that.

F: Let's talk just a moment about Hirshhorn. How much did Mrs. Johnson get involved in that?

O: I'd say that she was the one that was the go-between that made it possible for us to find a location for that, which is the key to the whole thing, because it isn't easy to find a location. To do that we had to get rid of that old military museum, with two-headed babies in it. And to do that--the building was just no damned good--that came under my aegis. I was in charge of the Mall, you see.

I worked with her on that. I knew that if we went to any of those generals, they'd dig their heels in. So we got hold of Mr. McNamara--she did--and he told the generals that that little building was going to come down. That left us a place to move in there and to put the Hirshhorn building. If we hadn't done that, I don't know where we would have gone. So I give her responsibility, although I think President Johnson himself and certainly Roger Stevens had a lot to do with it.

F: Who's Stevens?

O: Roger Stevens, who was the head of the Kennedy Center.

F: Oh, yes. Did the President, do you think, show any actual interest in getting the Hirshhorn collection there?

O: Yes. Somehow Dillon and Mrs. Johnson stirred him up. He was the key. He responded to it, took the leadership in it, and without him it couldn't have been done. It was quite a thing to get Hirshhorn to agree to come to Washington. He really was sought after all over the world--the Tait in London, for example, we know that.

F: The President of the United States cannot stick his neck out just for fear of getting it chopped off to ask--how does he make his wishes known?

O: Through Dillon Ripley and through Mrs. Johnson and people like that. This was in the aegis of the Smithsonian, but Dillon Ripley, who worked hand and glove with Johnson--between them, Johnson really gave Dillon Ripley the prestige of his name at Ripley's request rather than the other way around. Johnson did not instigate it, he couldn't.

be expected to.

F: Right. Back to the library a moment. In something like this--I know you don't need the business--is it competitive?

O: We always need new prestigous work. In that case, what the Johnsons did was to ask Max Brooks to pick himself somebody that he thought was good, and Mrs. Johnson personally visited every major project in person to see if she liked it.

F: Did you go with her on any of these trips?

O: No, I never went on any of them.

F: Did she ever talk architecture or libraries with you?

O: Quite a lot. Then architecture and sculpture and art all the time with her, a great deal. She had great intellectual curiosity.

F: Did you find that she pretty much knew what she was talking about?

O: Yes, and she knew what she didn't know, too. She had a marvelous sense of understanding her limitations. I remember once we were talking about Henry Moore, and she said, "Well, he's still beyond me. I haven't gotten to the point where I can understand him yet." I like that. I always remember I was explaining how the design of the Mall went, and I was sitting on the floor and there was a Persian rug there--

F: Where was this?

O: In the Yellow Sitting Room in the White House. There was a Persian rug there and it's filled with detail, but the main lines are very strong. I pointed to it and I said, "Now the design in this rug is just the same as the design of the Mall. You have

the big strong circulation lines and then you have these fill-ins." I had several opportunities to spend several hours going over the details of different kinds of design philosophies so that she understood them. I talked big planning, and then Walter Washington and some of them would talk small planning for the ghettos. She was also interested in all the work on the little New Mexico church of Los Trampos. I showed her slides on that, probably spent an hour and a half one afternoon up in the Lincoln Room. She was great.

P: She agreed with you on Los Trampos? (an 18th Century adobe church)

O: Very much so. We thought very much of making it a feature once at one of her meetings, but we decided against it.

P: Let's talk very briefly about Los Trampos? For the record, how you got into it.

O: I got into it because I got a clipping from one of my architect friends in Santa Fe, where I have a house, saying that for the first time in a hundred years somebody suddenly decided that this isolated Spanish-American area needed a freeway. They had gotten along real well up to that time without it. The freeway was going to cut off the cemetery and threatened the corner of the church. Couldn't I do something about it?

A new law had been put into effect recently which was that the highway department or nobody else could impinge upon a national historic site or a national monument or a landmark. But this church--Los Trampos--didn't have a land mark status yet. So we needed this church to be gotten into a landmark status awfully

quick. We had probably the nearest thing to instant landmark status created for that church. In this case we were doing all right because historian Bob Utley had lived out there in Santa Fe for a time, fifteen years, so he knew all about it. We got our landmark.

As soon as we did that, then I got Stewart Udall to write a letter to Senator Alan Boyd and Dot who already knew about it, Secretary of Transportation. As chairman of the Pennsylvania Avenue Commission with these fellows on my own commission, I could talk to them each on the telephone. Udall asked Boyd to see to that the money would not be forthcoming to build that road in New Mexico until such time as the alignment was changed. And then at the same time I had talked to the Governor of the State of New Mexico and he agreed, and a couple of senators agreed, if we could get it changed fast, because they didn't want to wait. So we had what we called the Treaty of Santa Fe out there, where we had representatives of Interior, Transportation, the Governor was there himself, these senators were there, the Parks Service was there. I had to create a little foundation, which we financed privately, called the Los Tramos foundation to be the corpus because there wasn't any town really. The town didn't have a body. So we all met, signed a piece of paper, we drew up our own plans, put the road around it, and put the bridge in the way we wanted it, built it of timbers the way the old bridge had left a place for the cattle to get down to the stream, which is something they never do on these freeways. And bang, bang, it was in. Just great.

I think it's one of the few times when that law worked.

F: One last question. This is rumor, and you may not be able to do anything about it. One of the rumors is that the LBJ Library appeals very much to him as a strong massive piece of architecture; to her it doesn't quite have the delicacy that a woman would like in a building. Have you run into any expressions on this at all?

O: No.

F: It's his building and not hers.

O: I really don't know anything about that except that I'd be very much inclined to respect her opinion.

F: I can't fault that.

End of Tape Two

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By NATHANIEL OWINGS

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

In accordance with Section 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, Nathaniel Owings, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and a transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder, and all literary property rights, will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.

2. It is the donor's wish to make the material donated to the United States of America by terms of this instrument available for research as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

3. A revision of this stipulation governing access to the material for research may be entered into between the donor and the Archivist of the United States, or his designee, if it appears desirable.

4. The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Signed Nathaniel Owings

Date Aug 19-75

Accepted

Director, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library for Archivist of the United States

Date September 8, 1975