

THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Norman Tucker

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

MISSIAEN: Norman Tucker lives at 400 7th Street SE on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. Norman, we'll start off with a little of your biographical information starting with when and where you were born.

TUCKER: I was born at old Sibley Hospital in Washington, DC, December the 7th, 1926, and at the age of four days, moved to McLean, Virginia which was the suburbs at that time. My father and mother lived in a Sears/Roebuck house. Every week we came in to visit my grandmother and grandfather, here in Washington, DC, at 400 7th Street.

MISSIAEN: Could you tell us, give your grandmother and grandfather's name?

TUCKER: My grandfather's name was Thomas Tucker and my grandmother's name was Mary Jane Tucker.

MISSIAEN: Could you describe the house that they lived in, as you remember it?

TUCKER: Yes. We live in it currently at 400 7th Street SE. But in those days, back in the late '20s and the '30s and before that, it had two addresses: one of them was 400 7th Street SE and the other was 701 D Street SE, which was used more often than the 400, because 701 D Street was my grandfather's store. He and his brother whose name was William Tucker, owned a store operated it here, called Tucker Brothers Fine Groceries. It was operated from 1903 until my grandfather died in 1935. My grandfather died in this house and his wife, Mary, died approximately a week and a half later than he did, in this house. Both of them were not ill for a long time. We have pictures here of the store.

MISSIAEN: OK. We'll take a look at the pictures afterwards and I can, we'll decide whether we want to try to make copies.

TUCKER: The front room, which we have now used as our living room, was the store. Then you had the dining room, and an eat-in kitchen. Upstairs, they had three bedrooms. The house was heated by gas heat. They had the wall sconces of gas. They had Franklin stoves which were gas. That was converted to oil, excuse me, it was converted to coal in the early '20s and then to oil, later on. In fact, the house, I remember when I was young, in the back yard, had an outdoor privy, which I don't think is allowed anymore in Washington.

MISSIAEN: You mentioned the gas sconces on the wall. Were there gas lights in the house?

TUCKER: Yes, gas lights in the sconces on the wall.

MISSIAEN: When you were young?

TUCKER: No. They had changed by the time I got here or at least I remember. Back here is where they had one of the heaters. Then, they a big iron stove in the kitchen, which was fueled by coal.



Tucker' Grocery Store, 1919
Uncle Billy Tucker and Thomas W. Tucker

MISSIAEN: Did your father grow up in this house?

TUCKER: Yes. My father grew up in this house. Actually, my grandfather lived over in 445 New Jersey Avenue SE and that's where my father and his brother, who was approximately 6 years older lived. As they grew up, they moved here in 1903. My father was born in 1896. Both my grandfather, both my uncle, Ralph and my father -- primarily Uncle Ralph -- helped in building the tunnel that goes under the city here to Union Station. It was built and dug by Irish immigrants. My Uncle Ralph was a water boy. My father used to stand at the entrance of the tunnel and helped ladle out the water to Uncle Ralph.

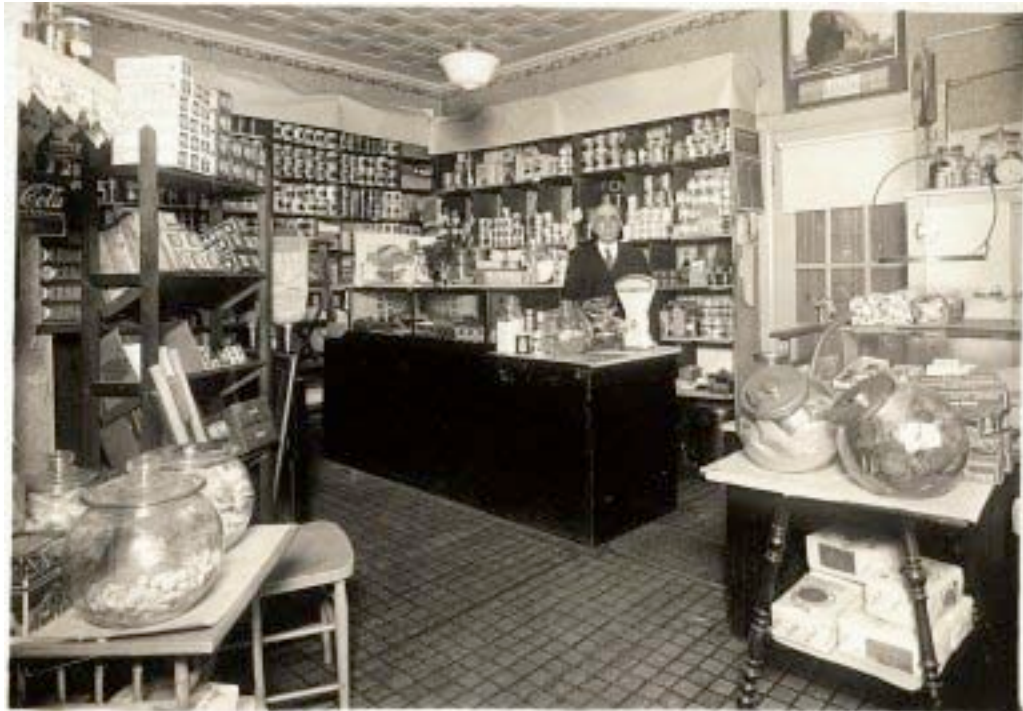
MISSIAEN: This was the train tunnel?

TUCKER: Yes. The train station tunnel, which is still in use. Southwest Washington used to be kind of a notorious place for gambling and houses of ill repute at that time. My Uncle used to get paid to take people to show 'em what house to go to.

MISSIAEN: What kind of merchandise do you remember in the store?

TUCKER: In the store, there was, it was, cookies, flour, sugar, canned goods, coffee, tea, some eggs and butter. It was a corner grocery store, which almost every corner in Washington had one. There used to be

as far as produce, it used to be brought around on huckster wagons and they would come two or three days a week. Also, the iceman came. I remember big ice trucks. We would jump on the back and get a piece of ice in the summer time. As far as meat, people went to Eastern Market, because Eastern Market operated Saturdays, was a big day. I think Wednesday was a big day, and they were half a day on Thursday and all day Friday. That was the primary place that people would get their meat.



Interior, Tucker's Grocery Store, 1925

MISSIAEN: So, did your grandparents shop at Eastern Market as far as...?

TUCKER: Oh yes, I went up with my grandfather quite frequently.

MISSIAEN: What do you remember about shopping at the Market?

TUCKER: It seems as if there were, instead of the one major aisle coming down the middle of the market now inside, there were two. People had just the booths on either side and booths in the middle. Market Lunch, at that time, was not where it was located now. I think it was back further.

MISSIAEN: Market Lunch existed then?

TUCKER: There was some lunch room there, yes. The farmers came almost every day outside, under the roof. Inside they sold fish and meat. I remember a lot of pork, a lot of beef. Outside, they had people selling chickens, both live and cut up. In fact, I think the last man to sell chickens outside of the market was about 1980-81, sometime along then.

They also used to have people come around that sharpened knives and scissors. They would come and they would chant on the street. They had the grinding wheel on their back and they would set it up. The people would go out and get their scissors and knives sharpened. They would come I would guess every month or so.

Also, one of the things I looked forward to when I was a child. They would come around with man-made sno-balls. They would scrape the ice, and put it in a cup and put different flavors on it.

Let me let the dog out.

MISSIAEN: Ok.

TUCKER: My mother was always anxious about the sno-ball man because he had a dirty old rag covering the ice. My grandmother used to say "Oh, let him eat. It'll be fine and nothing's wrong." And speaking of the iceman, they used to have a square cardboard that you put in the window. It would have on it, on the top "0," on the side "25," and another side "50," and one side "75." You would put it up so the iceman could read from the outside how much ice you wanted that day and he would bring it in and put it in the refrigerator.

MISSIAEN: Was the icebox connected to the outside; was it built into the house?

TUCKER: No, it was just an icebox.

MISSIAEN: Did the iceman bring ice every day?

TUCKER: I don't remember if they came every day, or it was every other day. But I remember that my grandfather, I think, was one of the first ones that had an electric refrigerator or icebox that they put in the store, because there they would have the cheese and butter and eggs.

MISSIAEN: Did he go to wholesalers to purchase his merchandise? Do you remember?

TUCKER: Outside of the house, they had boxes for bread to be delivered in. The bread was delivered every day. He would get delivery from... there used to be in fact a wholesaler down on either, I think it was down on 11th Street. They closed up about 1950, I think, or 1951. But, there used to be another group called the District Grocery Stores, which was located down at 4th Street SW. I don't think my grandfather ever had things there, but I think salesmen came around to the house or the store and would take orders for the different canned goods, sugar and so forth. I do not have any invoices that show where he bought that from.

As a side note was that before my grandparents [came] here, and this goes back, my grandmother's name was Welsh. She had a grandfather that used to operate a boat on the Potomac River, bringing fish up to Washington, and sold fish – herring, shad, and others – and also, he would bring things to the people along the river. It was molasses and sugar and whiskey. There were other goods that he would also [bring], he was like a purveyor of goods to people who lived along the river. That's just a side note.

MISSIAEN: All of it's important. Were there any special treats? Did your grandfather's store sell candy?

TUCKER: Oh yes, yes.

MISSIAEN: Did the children come?

TUCKER: Oh yes, yes. And also, the store, they used to carry a book on people. People would buy things here and then pay at the end of the month, which was very common back in the teens and '20s and '30s. My grandfather died in 1935. There was money owed to him by some of the people. Neither my uncle nor my father thought it was proper to go to court to try to get the money. So, they didn't, so they closed the store.

MISSIAEN: Oh, they closed the store shortly after your grandfather died?

TUCKER: Yeah.

MISSIAEN: Uour uncle had participated in running the store?

TUCKER: Oh no. My uncle was a master mechanic in charge of the cartridge case shop in the Navy Yard. During WWII, he was in charge not only of the cartridge case shop but the recoil spring shop. The Navy Yard was quite interesting. I used to go down there quite frequently when I was young. I remember that they used to mill the guns for the battleships and heavy cruisers. The 14" and 16" cannons. As my uncle used to tell me, this was the only place they made them. They would bring them in and mill the inside of the barrel. Then they would have to set 'em outside. You used to see them about 2nd and 3rd Street at M Street SE. You would see them piled up. They would have to age for 8 to 10 to 12 years. [Correct-MM] Then, they would take them back in and re-mill them. Then they would ship them out on these long railroad cars to either Philadelphia or wherever the Navy Yard was building the ship, and they would be installed on the battleships. I believe this was the only Navy Yard in the country that made these guns. They stopped making those about 1944. Also, the Navy Yard was the one that made the trigger for the atomic bomb that was used in Japan. Did you know that?

MISSIAEN: No, I didn't know that. Well that was during the Second World War. The Navy Yard was a very large employer until after the Second World War.

TUCKER: Yes. And it was, um, they had two of them there. They had Little Man and Big Boy, or Fat Boy, I think it was. The two bombs that were. And they are on exhibit down there now, you know, the replicas of them.

MISSIAEN: What did your father do?

TUCKER: My father did not finish high school. He went to Eastern High School. He left and went in the Government and got a job as a messenger. He joined the army, the National Guard. He was activated in the army. He was working over, not working, he was standing guard, as one of the military people over at Arlington Cemetery when they were building the Tomb of the Unknown and the amphitheater. Then, when WWI broke out, he was shipped overseas. He got a battlefield commission and became a 1st Lieutenant. He got shot in the leg at the end of the War. He came home and went back to work the Department of Agriculture where he had been working before. He stayed with the Department of Agriculture and his total service was 43 years.

MISSIAEN: Terry Lewis mentioned that your father was a volunteer fireman.

TUCKER: No, I was a volunteer fireman.

MISSIAEN: Oh, you were a volunteer fireman.

TUCKER: Out in McLean Virginia as I was growing up. My father used to say that we had a very efficient fire department, we never lost a basement. Now it is very professional. But the siren used to go off. Everybody would run like the devil to get on the fire truck to go where they were going to try to put a fire out.

MISSIAEN: Talk about the kind of transportation you used when your were growing, when you were visiting Capitol Hill as a young boy.

TUCKER: Well, my grandfather Tucker also was a streetcar conductor for the Capitol Traction Company. He worked his way up to one of the best routes, which was from the Navy Yard to Roslyn. Originally it used to be horse-drawn. Down at the bottom of Capitol Hill, which they called Jenkins Hill, they had a stable because when the horses pulled the trolleys from Roslyn over that far, they would unhitch them and put either four or six horses on to pull them up the Hill, to pull the trolleys up the Hill. I actually have pictures of some of that. Then he retired from that or quit from that. His brother had been operating the store. They bought this house in 1903 and opened the store. I think this house was built, as I was told by a realtor, was built in 1888.

MISSIAEN: What was out here where the Metro Plaza is, when you were growing up?

TUCKER: There was a park and South Carolina Avenue went through. Over on 8th Street you had 8th Street coming down, Pennsylvania Avenue and South Carolina. So you had many intersections. It was a park and they had, I don't know what you call it, fencing but what would you call it? But anyway they used to also, at was like a tunnel of trees on both sides of Pennsylvania Avenue, they had these gigantic, I imagine they were elm. Streetcars came down the middle of the Avenue. There was large trees planted there, so it was like going through a tunnel of trees.



**Intersection of 7th Street, D Street, and South Carolina Avenue SE, Looking East
February 11, 1951 (photo by Joe Tenschert, 152A KStreet NW, DC)**

Entertainment-wise around here, they used to have a theater, a movie house called the Avenue Grand, which was located on Pennsylvania Avenue, between 6th and 7th. Later on, they opened one of the first air-cooled movie houses in Washington, called the Penn Theater. In the summertime, people, when it got so hot and humid around Washington, they would go to the Penn. It didn't matter what the movie was, but they went there to get cool.

There also was a theater that opened around on 8th Street, called the Academy. My father used to call it the zoo. We used to go there on Saturdays. It cost 10 cents. You would get a double feature, one or two serials, a couple of comedies and short subjects. It was guaranteed to last for at least four hours. Many the time my father came in to pull me out of the theater because he was going home; it was 6 o'clock. The

theater didn't open until 1:00, and if you weren't in the first rush of people that got in, you wouldn't get a seat; you would have to stand up.

MISSIAEN: Who are some of the old time families around the Hill that you remember?

TUCKER: There were the Luskys, that lived down the street here, on 7th Street. Mr. Lusky was either a fireman or a policeman. He had 12 children, most of them are gone, but there's one or two are left. One of them, two of them we know. Anne [Tucker] visits with them about every week. Then next door there were the McCarthys. There was Justin McCarthy and I forget the other brother's name, but they were interesting in that both of them played musical instruments and they were in the original Navy Band which was formed in 1924.

MISSIAEN: Where did you say these families lived?

TUCKER: They lived on D Street.

MISSIAEN: On the 700 block?

TUCKER: 703 and 707 D Street. The father lived in 705, I believe. I took banjo lessons from Justin McCarthy for a few years, but he finally decided that I was not musically inclined.

MISSIAEN: Are there other long-time families that you remember?

TUCKER: Not really. Lot of people have moved. Well, there were the Grogans that lived down here. They lived at 711 D Street, Helen Grogan and her husband. He died. There used to be a police lieutenant who lived at 412 7th Street. Mr. Middleton, who was an accomplished carpenter lived at 715, I believe, D Street. At the corner of 8th Street, which is now Payless Shoes, used to be a very large barber shop. Up on Pennsylvania Avenue, I believe it was called the Gym, I'm not sure of that, was a saloon.

MISSIAEN: The 600 block of Pennsylvania Avenue?

TUCKER: Right at 7th and Pennsylvania Avenue. As my father was growing up, when there were workers around, they used to ask him to go up and get them a pail of beer at lunch. They would put butter or lard, usually butter, just a thin coat on the inside of the pail, so you wouldn't get too much foam. Also, there used to be where Bread and Chocolate is located now, a Kresge's. What was very interesting about the Kresge's, and I guess this was about 1936 also, they had one of the first donut-making machines. It was right on the corner and people would stand in the window and watch this donut-making machine. It was all automated, where it would plop out a hunk of dough, with a hole in it, and go down be fried and so forth. Kresge's also used to have a very fine counter for food. People used to eat their dinners there. And the kitchen was downstairs.

MISSIAEN: In the basement?

TUCKER: Yeah.

MISSIAEN: What about other restaurants in the neighborhood. Do you remember other ones?

TUCKER: There were quite a few on 7th Street. There were a lot of bars. Peoples Drugstore was located where JJ Mutts is now. Of course, they had the Little Tavern. They didn't have too many, you know, eating establishments, because people didn't eat out a lot. They drank out a lot, but they didn't eat out a lot.

MISSIAEN: You went to schools in McLean?

TUCKER: No, I went to [elementary] school in McLean. Then, Virginia didn't have a 7th grade. Since my father for the government, I could go to District schools. District schools, at that time, ranked very high, either 2nd or 3rd in the country. And I went to Western High School. I would ride in with my father in the morning, when he went to work and hitchhike home in the afternoon, which was very common. Or, take the streetcar out to the stop 20, which was at Manning Place and walk down to Chain Bridge, and then hitchhike home. But people used to know each other then. McLean wasn't as big, anywhere as near as big a community as it is now and you'd know people, so it was no difficulty getting a ride.

MISSIAEN: Where was Western High School located?

TUCKER: At 35th and Reservoir Road, which is now the Duke Ellington School. Also, I remember there used to be the Georgetown Market, the Western Market, the Central Market, the O Street Market, and Eastern Market. Of all those markets, Dean and Deluca have the Georgetown Market, K Street Market went the way of a big building, O Street Market the building is there, but I don't think it is in any real use. Central Market, which was a big market, up around New York Avenue and 5th Street is no longer in existence. So, Eastern Market is the only really market around that is still in business.

Let me go see to Boomer again please.

MISSIAEN: What do you remember about churches in the neighborhood?

TUCKER: Ah, my grandmother was Catholic. She went to St. Peter's church. I think my grandfather was Episcopalian, but kind of a wayward one that didn't go to church. My grandmother and uncle were buried out of St. Peter's. An interesting story about St. Peter's. When my father was born, November 15th, a cold day.

MISSIAEN: What year was that?

TUCKER: 1896. As they used to do, evidently in those days, they used to take the children as soon as they possibly could to be baptized. So they took my father up to St. Peter's Church and a cousin or friend took him up there and was to have him baptized as Norman Paul Tucker. My father, after he retired from the government, he and my mother decided to go on a trip. My mother, at a young age, about 9 years old had lived in Panama for two years. That was when my uncle was working with the Pennsylvania Railroad in building the Panama Canal. She wanted to go back and see what it was like. So Father and she decided to take this trip. It was on a ship that left from New York and went all down through there, but when Father went to get his passport, they had no record of his being born, which was not unheard of in those days. So he told them, he was baptized in St. Peter's Church and he gave them the date. So they checked with the records of St. Peter's Church. And St. Peter's Church said "No, there was no Norman Paul Tucker baptized here then." And they said wait a minute. There was a Norman Francis Tucker baptized. Well, evidently, the woman who took my father up to be baptized didn't remember what they wanted or didn't like the name Paul. So she named him Francis. So, anyway, I think they got that squared away after a while.

Of course you know that St. Peter's burned in I think it was 1941. A big fire. The other churches have been around for a long time. Of course, I think my grandfather used to go down here to the Episcopal church...

MISSIAEN: You mean Christ Church?

TUCKER: Christ Church. Yeah. I believe he used to go there. All of my grandparents and uncle are buried in Congressional Cemetery.

MISSIAEN: Do you remember what was located on the corner of 7th and Pennsylvania, where Hine Junior High is now?

TUCKER: It was a school, when I remember, because I remember when I was a child, I used to come over on Wednesdays a lot of times, before I went to school on Wednesdays to visit my grand parents. And I would sit out there in the front yard with some other young kids around here in the neighborhood, one was Charlie Hill that lived down at 720, I guess, 714 or 716, no 400, 416 or 414, and he and I would sit there. A lot of kids would come home for lunch, because in those days, people, all the kids used to come home for lunch. They would just parade by here. I don't know of any other schools, but evidently that was also or located near there what was part of it was Eastern High School, that's where my father and uncle went.

MISSIAEN: Eastern High School was not located where it is now?

TUCKER: I don't believe so.

MISSIAEN: What about the old Navy Hospital? Did you ever go there?

TUCKER: I remember when I was a child going by there and seeing white-haired, big mustached veterans sitting out in the yard. They used to tell me it was from the Spanish-American War.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

MISSIAEN: Who lived in this house after your grandfather died?

TUCKER: My uncle lived here until he died in 1956, I believe it was, 1952. Then it was rented and my father kept it. Later on Anne and I lived in Washington, up in northwest. After the children were gone, we decided to look for a place, a smaller house. Ann was coming down here with the contractor to have the house painted. She said this is the ideal size, so we moved in here. That was in the 1970s. Ann, what date was it that we moved here? 1979? 1978? 1977. So, we have lived here since then. But the house has been in the family since 1903.

MISSIAEN: Talk about some of the changes you've seen in the neighborhood since you were a boy.

TUCKER: Of course, there's the Metro. There is no longer streetcars. The neighborhood seems to be, it's not as easy going as it used to be. There weren't many cars then. My uncle always had a car. He wanted to keep up to date on the big cars. He always would buy a big car. He got permission or rather the District made a driveway for him. We even have the permit from 1923 when he had the driveway put in.

MISSIAEN: Was the garage built at that time? Or did the garage...

TUCKER: No, the garage was built later. The garage cost a total of \$300 to be built and we have the receipt for that. And we have the receipt from the Government where they said, that was 1923, that they lowered the sidewalk and helped put in the driveway. I think that cost \$23, \$25 something like that.

MISSIAEN: You talked about businesses on Pennsylvania Avenue, but was 8th Street a busy street when you were growing up?

TUCKER: Yes, they had a lot of barber shops and they had a lot of bars down by the Marine Barracks, because of the barracks being there and also the profusion of military and navy personnel at the Navy Yard. I don't remember any specific... Hardware stores have been here for a long time.

MISSIAEN: Was Frager's one of the early hardware stores?

TUCKER: I think Frager's started in the 1920s, I'm not sure when Frager's started. But I don't remember because we used to go round right here on... I guess District Hardware was a hardware store for a long period of time.

MISSIAEN: That's where you went?

TUCKER: Yes, I think that's where they got things. Yes. This whole area around here was primarily blue-collar people that worked in the Navy Yard, carpenters, plumbers. A lot of the people that lived in Southeast, came from down in Southern Maryland where they were running out of... you know, too many children for the family to exist on the farm. They came up here because I know that my grandfather and grandmother came down from near Port Tobacco, Maryland and moved up here at an early age. There were more opportunities here. So you had a lot of the people that lived in this area came up here because of the Navy Yard and the government.

MISSIAEN: Did you ever play on the Capitol Grounds?

TUCKER: No, I remember going down and seeing Franklin Delano Roosevelt, his inauguration. It was a very, very cold day. We could play right out in the park over here. They had a Boys Club at the substation over here.

MISSIAEN: You mean over here at 5th and E?

TUCKER: Yeah.

MISSIAEN: Was there anything else we should talk about that you haven't thought of?

TUCKER: My uncle and father said that at an early age they used to go swimming in the Anacostia River.

MISSIAEN: Did you ever go swimming in the Anacostia?

TUCKER: Oh no.

MISSIAEN: Did you ever go swimming in the Potomac?

TUCKER: Yes. Above Washington, up from McLean over, from Little Falls north to about where the American Legion Bridge is located now. We used to go out there and fish and stay on the little islands and swim and spend our time.

MISSIAEN: Was there a pool?

TUCKER: Pool?

MISSIAEN: A swimming pool on Capitol Hill?

TUCKER: No, not that I know of. No, I don't remember one.

MISSIAEN: Anything else you want to discuss?

TUCKER: No, I guess that's it.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2

END OF INTERVIEW