



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Peter Powers

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Transcriber: Betsy Barnett

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

MARTIN: Okay, Mr. Peter Powers. Thank you for welcoming me into your home for this interview. My name is Nancy Martin. I am a volunteer interviewer for the Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project and I am honored to have been asked by the administrators of this history project to conduct this interview with you. The administrators of the project are most eager to gain even more information that you would like to give. We should note here that Mr. Powers joined Mr. Franzén in the last interview with Ruth Ann Overbeck at Sibley Hospital, March 30, 2000, just before her death on April 1st. In that interview Mr. Powers gave some intriguing information about his years serving as president of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society. To today's interview, perhaps you, Mr. Powers, would like to add more such information, including information about everyday life here on Capitol Hill over the years. And, I'd like to note that this interview is being recorded with Mr. Powers in his kitchen at his lovely home here at 325 A Street SE. And the date is January 5, 2004. I have given Mr. Powers a list of questions that are intended merely as a catalyst to keep our conversation going. I know Mr. Powers will have lots of information that he'd like to add. And these questions are just to start the conversation going. And, I could start out by asking, when did you come to Capitol Hill and what were the circumstances? What was your position then? Did you intend to stay?

POWERS: Well, I believe it was about that time that I was—I've been married twice—and I was thinking of getting divorced. I'd been living in Georgetown with my first wife. And, a friend of mine was coming up here and, so, I came up and began to look around.

MARTIN: About what year was this?

POWERS: Oh, about '67 or '68.

MARTIN: Okay.

POWERS: Around somewhere in there. It was quite some time ago, so I don't remember everything very clearly. And, first, I lived over on A Street, Northeast, 650 I think it was. Just very briefly, for a month or two. It was a house with a traditional outside but had been completely remodeled by Bob Reich and very modern inside. It was a really good bachelor's house.

MARTIN: So, that would be close to where Barbara Reich's first house was.

POWERS: That's...it was her first...

MARTIN: It was her—okay, with the gingerbread outside. Right. Okay. [ed: probably 617 A Street NE]

POWERS: Okay.

MARTIN: So, you lived there.

POWERS: Just briefly.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: And, then, my friend from the Smithsonian, he had had an accident, but he came back. And he was a bachelor. So, I sold it to him, and at about the same time, Barbara Held's [Barbara Held Reich's] people showed me... Well, while he was away for the first time, they showed me this house at 325 A Street [SE] for him theoretically. But, I hadn't been in here twenty minutes and I realized this was my house.

MARTIN: Oh, that's a great story.

POWERS: So...

MARTIN: Because of the location or the historic house itself?

POWERS: Well, the whole thing. And the big... There's an enormous oak tree in the back yard. And, it's a house that's got quite a wide yard. It's twenty-two feet wide. It's got twelve foot ceilings. But, it's not a big house in the sense of very many rooms. It's got two baths and so forth. Anyway, I loved it immediately and decided to buy it. So, I gave my friend from the Smithsonian, Mr. Charles Blitzer, I sold him back his house over on 650 A Street, Northeast, and I decided to buy this house. Which I did. I hadn't even met my wife Kathryn. So.

MARTIN: All right. Now tell us how you met Kathryn then.

POWERS: A young man, let's see, was working in my office briefly. He and a friend of his had been over on the shore, Rehoboth or somewhere, one afternoon. And I was here. I had just moved in here. And they all came to visit me. I guess it must have been in, I don't know, July or somewhere like that. And Kathryn was among them. And I wanted a companion to go north to the woods. My family has a lovely property on a lake in North Woods in Maine and I was going to go. So, I invited her along. So, she came. And, then, later, I went to visit her in Japan. She and a friend (still a great friend, great friend) were working an around the world tour and they were starting off in Tokyo. So, I flew to Tokyo, spent Christmas with her.

MARTIN: In the end of the '60s? This was about '68?

POWERS: Yeah, about '68, somewhere in there. No, it has to be almost '70, because... yes. Maybe it's Christmas of '69. And she and her friend are going around the world. And I had a trip for the Smithsonian to Paris.

MARTIN: You were Counsel for the Smithsonian at that time?

POWERS: Smithsonian at that time, yes. And she stopped off in Paris on the way back and that's where we became engaged. And we were married in May of '70. She's from Pennsylvania. She's Pennsylvania Dutch. Okay?

MARTIN: Good start.

POWERS: Yeah. Now, I served as Counsel at the Smithsonian for over 30 years. They had never had a counsel before and I heard about it rather by chance in a way. I had some friends at the University Club where I was then a member and a friend gave me an introduction to Mr. Ripley. S. Dillon Ripley was then, had just become, the Secretary of the Smithsonian and this friend had learned that he was... The Smithsonian had never had a counsel. They had relied on the Counsel of the National Gallery. Too complicated to explain all that. But, anyway, this friend arranged an interview with Mr. Ripley. And this was just before the days when you had to interview every kind of person in order to, before the Civil Rights Act and all that sort of stuff. So, he and I got along like a house afire and I found myself Counsel for the Smithsonian.

MARTIN: And stayed 30 years.

POWERS: And stayed 30 years. I had no idea what I was getting into.

MARTIN: And when did you retire, just recently?

POWERS: Seven years ago.

MARTIN: Any good stories about being Counsel to the Smithsonian?

POWERS: Well.

MARTIN: That you'd like recorded and see published?

POWERS: No. I mean, I can't... It isn't that there aren't any, but I can't remember them just like that. Questions for life on Capitol Hill [referring to interviewer's list of questions]. Well, the Hill was an entirely different place than it is right now, in a sense. Where we are right now was not in disrepair. This

area right near the Capitol was not in bad shape. But, not so far away, the houses were not in too good shape. It varied.

MARTIN: Just across Fourth Street, maybe Fifth?

POWERS: Well, below that, yeah. And what they call gentrification had not really begun. But, it was beginning. People would see that this was a nice place to live and the prices were very reasonable.

MARTIN: Do you remember how much you paid for this house?

POWERS: Yes. I paid \$55,000. And everybody said, "Oh, that's a very full price." But, I didn't argue about it. That was the price that was asking and I said okay. I added up what I could pay by mortgage and so forth and I said I'll take it. And, I've never regretted it. I think it was the tree in the back yard that made up my mind. It's a great big... Well, you can see it through this window. It's a great big oak tree.

MARTIN: And Hiram spent many hours playing in the back yard. [ed: Hiram is Powers' younger son, mentioned by Martin because he is a contemporary of her daughter's; he also has an older son Peter.]

POWERS: I guess. I put in that pond. Oh, it had been a sort of a... just a little rock garden.

MARTIN: Did you have any doubts about raising Hiram in the city here.

POWERS: No, no. This part of... I don't know what the rest of Capitol Hill was supposed to be like, but this part was very nice.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: It's all very nice.

MARTIN: And always was.

POWERS: Yeah. And I think he went briefly to Peabody.

MARTIN: Right. He was in Sorin's class. [ed: Sorin is interviewer's daughter.]

POWERS: There you go. Well, you know that. Yeah.

MARTIN: Right. Debbie Murphy [teacher at Peabody School]. Remember?

POWERS: Yeah, yeah, right. Kathryn told me about that.

MARTIN: And, then he went over to Watkins for that one year.

POWERS: Um-hmm.

MARTIN: And then he transferred to St. Albans in the third grade. Is that right?

POWERS: Yeah, because he sang in the choir there.

MARTIN: At St. Albans.

POWERS: Yeah.

MARTIN: Uh-huh, right. Sure, we felt we were doing a good thing. We enjoyed, certainly, those early years in public school.

POWERS: Yeah. Well, it wasn't bad. Who was that wonderful lady who was in charge of all the, that cluster of schools? Great woman.

MARTIN: Sharon Raimo? No, she was the activist on the... Um.

POWERS: Well, you would know. You would recognize the name.

MARTIN: Yeah, I would. Okay. I remember. She died. Florence... I'll have to remember. [Ed: Veola Jackson was the first principal in charge of the Capitol Hill Cluster Schools.] What did you think of as encompassing Capitol Hill at that time? Did it go out to Eleventh Street?

POWERS: Oh, yes.

MARTIN: What was your mindset at that time?

POWERS: Oh yes, at least. There were some lovely houses on Eleventh Street. And people were already living... That was one area that was already in good shape.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: It never went down.

MARTIN: It went block by block, didn't it?

POWERS: I guess.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: We were just at a party at Dick Wolf's on New Year's Eve, New Year's Day. I don't know how long he's been there, but it's a long time. [Dick Wolf lived at 146 11th Street SE at the time of this interview.] And those 11th Street houses are very nice.

MARTIN: They are beautiful.

POWERS: So, it certainly included that.

MARTIN: And you mentioned that, in this earlier interview with Ruth Ann Overbeck, you spoke about that house [Dick Wolf's]. That the architect, Hugh Jacobsen I guess it was, he did that.

POWERS: Yeah.

MARTIN: Yeah, right.

POWERS: Yeah.

MARTIN: What was D. C. government like when you came to the Hill?

POWERS: It seems to me... Well, first place, the president was Lyndon Johnson, as I recall. And he appointed the first D. C. council. It was an appointed council and Walter Washington was the first mayor, but appointed. And then he ran and was elected, or something like that. That's the most I can remember. A little bit dim. There've been... We went to see "Fog of War," the film, about McNamara. And there were little bits in there about the District at the time. But, I don't remember the details. We certainly didn't have an elected mayor at that point.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: But, it's dim in my memory.

MARTIN: Were you aware that the D. C. government had anything to do with our lives, our everyday lives, living here on Capitol Hill?

POWERS: Not much.

MARTIN: Right. That was my feeling also.

POWERS: Not much.

MARTIN: What was the everyday practical life like for you living on Capitol Hill years ago?

POWERS: Well...

MARTIN: What organizations did you belong to?

POWERS: One... oh, oh. Well, let's see. I joined the Restoration Society and I quickly became aware, although I wasn't at first, of St. Mark's [Episcopal Church]. It's next door. I don't know why. I certainly didn't buy the house because of St. Mark's. And, oh, I remember, Jim Adams.

MARTIN: Yes!

POWERS: Who became rector there fairly soon at the time that I came. He was very smart. He knew that I had been to Oxford in my undergraduate days. And he's an Anglophile anyway. So, he comes to pay a call and what does he talk about? Oxford.

MARTIN: Did he know?

POWERS: What?

MARTIN: Did he know that you had been there?

POWERS: Oh, yeah.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: Oh, yeah. It was fine. So, pretty soon I started to go to St. Mark's. And, whether that was before or after I met Kathryn and was married, I don't recall.

MARTIN: Where were you married?

POWERS: Oh, at Kathryn's place up in...

MARTIN: In Pennsylvania, uh-huh.

POWERS: Yeah, near Allentown.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: Good party.

MARTIN: You started to say what everyday life was like on Capitol Hill.

POWERS: Well, first place, it's very convenient up here. Over on Pennsylvania Avenue and so forth, there are enough shops and stores and even a few restaurants, you don't really have to go anywhere.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: You can walk everywhere, practically. I like that.

MARTIN: I miss the old Woolworth's 5-and-10. That was like a department store for me.

POWERS: Yeah.

MARTIN: That was a loss.

POWERS: That was helpful, but for me it wasn't terribly important. I thought it was a Kresge, but I guess it was a Woolworth.

MARTIN: It may have been Kresge's. [Ed: it was Kresge's.]

POWERS: That's where Bread and Chocolate is now, or something like that?

MARTIN: Yes, uh-huh.

POWERS: Yeah. And Eastern Market was a great discovery.

MARTIN: Do you remember what the Eastern Market issues were at that time, in the early '70s?

POWERS: No.

MARTIN: I just remember the issues as being exactly the same as they are now. [Laughs.]

POWERS: Same as they are now, yeah, yeah.

MARTIN: Did you go there Saturday mornings?

POWERS: Yeah, sometimes.

MARTIN: Do you remember at that time in the early '70s, the only tables outside, out front, were from the potting studio upstairs? Chuck Brome and I can't remember who else was running the potting studio. And they sold their wares outside. But, there were no other... the vegetable... farmers came in and set up their tables, but there was no flea market there. It was just the potting tables.

POWERS: I guess not. That came along later.

MARTIN: And pottery was big at that time, in the early '70s. That was a major part of the post-hippie era, I guess.

POWERS: Yeah. We have a few pots. I don't see any right off hand.

MARTIN: Made by Kathryn?

POWERS: Well, we have one or two made by Kathryn, but... No, no, that's the salt... I don't know. Anyway.

MARTIN: So, you would go on a Saturday. Did you eat at Boone's Lunch?

POWERS: Rarely.

MARTIN: I love that place. Can you describe what your favorite restaurants were in the early '70s on the Hill?

POWERS: Well, Jimmy T's has always had a certain appeal.

MARTIN: It does to me.

POWERS: Rarely go to the Hawk 'n Dove.

MARTIN: Um-hmm.

POWERS: Except that I can smoke there. [Interviewer laughs.] And I can at Jimmy T's.

MARTIN: How about when Hiram's home? Where would he go?

POWERS: Hiram? That doesn't ring a bell, because we often, we normally have lunch here.

MARTIN: Um-hmm.

POWERS: What was the A & K?

MARTIN: The A & K is now Greek Taverna Islands.

POWERS: Oh.

MARTIN: And, actually, that is the longest running restaurant here on Capitol Hill, and I'm suggesting that Bill and Gabe who run that restaurant that they be interviewed for this project also. They've been there 40 years.

POWERS: Gosh, yes.

MARTIN: Yeah. So, that's [unintelligible].

POWERS: Well, I've been over to the Taverna a certain amount.

MARTIN: Um-hmm.

POWERS: Not often, but sometimes.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: Do you remember what the grocery stores were at that time? Or the corner stores?

POWERS: No, not really. Well, there's always been a... I remember when an Italian ran, what was it called?

MARTIN: On East Capitol Street there?

POWERS: Yeah.

MARTIN: Across from Grubb's.

POWERS: Yeah.

MARTIN: I remember when it was called Cashway.

POWERS: Well, yeah, that's right. Well, there was an Italian in there who ran that.

MARTIN: How about barber shops?

POWERS: Well, I belong to the Metropolitan Club, so I get my hair cut there.

[statement deleted at request of family]

MARTIN: Uh-huh. Gas stations? Do you remember the gas stations on the Hill?

POWERS: There was always an Exxon there at... or rather a... at Eight and Ninth Street.

MARTIN: Where Distad's is.

POWERS: Well, it is Distad's. It still is Distad's. For some reason, Amoco has changed... It's got that blue thing, sign now, or trademark. But, it's the same thing. And I had a... I don't know how I found it. They won't take other people, but over on 13th Street, there's a car repair place, and they will fix my car and also change the oil and do good stuff like that for me. Bill's it's called. Well, his father was there before he died. But, that's where I take my car.

MARTIN: That's always been there, on 13th?

POWERS: Yes.

MARTIN: Southeast?

POWERS: Been there a long time. But, they won't take other people.

MARTIN: Okay. My car's at Distad's this very moment getting worked up. Do you remember what the school issues were then, why you were willing to have Hiram go to public school and then why you changed?

POWERS: Well. What was there, Brent? Where was Brent?

MARTIN: Brent was on Independence. [Ed: Brent is at Third Street and North Carolina Avenue SE.]

POWERS: Well, in any case, as I said, he went to sing in the choir [at St. Alban's]. And I forget whether that carried a scholarship with it, but I think it did. And so, that was that. And, then, when he got a little bit older, my own school was Groton School in Massachusetts. So, he went there. And that was costly.

MARTIN: Starting with the ninth grade?

POWERS: Something like that.

MARTIN: Uh-huh. Do you remember the antique stores on the Hill? Do you remember Libby's? Libby Sangster's Antiques on the Hill?

POWERS: Oh, sure. Oh sure.

MARTIN: Did you go in there?

POWERS: Oh, sure. Libby was a pal.

MARTIN: Oh, yeah. Do you have any good Libby Sangster stories to tell us?

POWERS: Not really. I have a couple of standing cast iron, you know, black, cast iron lamps in there that came from Libby.

MARTIN: I remember going in that store, my gosh, you had to plow through. But, she just sat there and said, "Go look and bring it to me."

POWERS: [Referring to interviewer's list of questions] Store front churches, I don't know about that.

MARTIN: There probably were no store front churches here. But, we live on East Capitol Street, 1124 East Capitol Street, and there still are store front churches in our neighborhood.

POWERS: Really, really.

MARTIN: Yeah, um-hmm. How about the police substations, the police department? Had you any connection with the police at that time, in the early '70s?

POWERS: Well, fortunately, no run-ins. I mean, it's over here on E Street is the substation.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: And I have a plant... I don't know where it is. I guess it's outside right now. A man, some people called Ottaway live next door.

MARTIN: Um-hmm.

POWERS: He works for *The [Washington] Post*. And, one summer, I mean it's more than, not last summer but at least the summer before, some foreign national was working there, was living there. A friend of theirs. And I took him over to the Fifth District Substation, whatever it was, to get him a card for his car.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: Okay. Well, he brought back this little, it's like an African violet or something like that.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: Listen, it's still going. It's going like mad.

MARTIN: Is that right?

POWERS: Yeah.

MARTIN: That was his thank-you present.

POWERS: Yeah, that's right.

MARTIN: And, are the Ottaways still here?

POWERS: Oh, yeah. I saw them this morning.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: They said they'd been off over New Year's at... They have a place in, it's not Bellow's Falls but it's something like that up in Pennsylvania. It was terrible, the weather was terrible, rain and fog. Anyway. They're pals.

MARTIN: I remember seeing you at the Library of Congress, no, it was the Museum of American History at that time, the concert series, in the early '80s.

POWERS: Oh, my gosh.

MARTIN: Yeah. Tell me about that.

POWERS: Well.

MARTIN: All the concerts on the Hill. That's what I remember, how much was available to us for years.

POWERS: Well, those weren't on the Hill particularly.

MARTIN: Right. But, that was with your organization. I know you were very much behind that.

POWERS: I... That must have started before I left the Smithsonian seven years ago, when I retired. I have been so-called Treasurer of the Friends of Music at the Smithsonian... for a long time.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: But, I don't have to do anything because there is a wonderful lady there who is an employee. Well, in the first place, there's Ken Slowick who lives around the corner over here on Fourth Street, who is the cellist and violist. Not violist. He can play the... They're going to have, what do they call those other six stringed instruments? Anyway, they're going to have that in a few weeks. He is a genius on the cello and he really runs the whole music, that music program, the chamber music program. And I have supported that with all my heart for about, God, it's got to be ten, eleven, twelve years, maybe longer.

MARTIN: Longer, uh-huh.

POWERS: It's longer than that, I think.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: So, we go to those. There are about ten or eleven concerts each year. And we go down there, I'm just trying to think, generally on Sundays. The Saturday concert is at 8:00 and the Sunday one's at 7:30.

MARTIN: Um-hmm.

POWERS: And we always park in the same illegal parking space. It's just perfect.

MARTIN: Now, has Mr. Slowick lived on the Hill for years?

POWERS: Well, no, not that long. But, he's been over there for several now.

MARTIN: Um-hmm.

POWERS: And, his wife Teresa, she works for the Smithsonian over in printing or for the American Art, I think it is, in their publishing section. Anyway.

MARTIN: Did you attend the other concerts, the concerts on the Capitol Hill lawn during the holidays?

POWERS: Not often.

MARTIN: Uh-huh. How about at the Library of Congress?

POWERS: And I don't go to those quartets at the Library of Congress.

MARTIN: Uh-huh. It's too difficult to get tickets.

POWERS: Well, it's that, and I don't care for that particular quartet all that much.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: There's a trio over there that's really great. Menachem Begin, Menachem—

MARTIN: Presslar?

POWERS: Presslar. He's one of the great musicians.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: So, we go for that. But, I'm too lazy.

MARTIN: Right. They do make it difficult, and it's so easy to go to the American, the National Museum of American History.

POWERS: That's pretty easy, yes.

MARTIN: Right. And then they perform on... [Telephone rings.] Let me stop this.

POWERS: Can you...

[Taping interrupted.]

MARTIN: Now, Mr. Powers, I'm sure you have some information about the good scandals that went on on Capitol Hill over the years. Who were the town characters and have you any good gossip like you'd like to tell us?

POWERS: Town characters.

MARTIN: And see published.

POWERS: Well, when you put it like that... I don't remember anything immediately. Town characters. Who was it, my great friend—Austin Beall.

MARTIN: Tell us about Austin Beall.

POWERS: You know Austin Beall?

MARTIN: I remember Austin Beall, um-hmm.

POWERS: Well, Austin Beall was a great friend. I don't know whether he was a town character. I guess he was.

MARTIN: Certainly an influential leader who had character.

POWERS: He had a lot of character and he was into a lot of things. And he had strong views about most things. He knew Ruth Ann very well. I don't remember a particular issue that he took a stand on, because he was very... He was a member of the Kiwanis Club. Now, that was another thing. I was a member of the Kiwanis Club—I am still—of Capitol Hill, and that was an interesting crowd. Who is it... it was mostly black, but not entirely. And, it... When I first joined there were some... We met at breakfast time at 7:30 and it was meeting at St. Mark's. And, then, it moved off to that hospital over in Northeast.

MARTIN: Rogers Memorial?

POWERS: Well, I don't remember.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: And, for quite a while it's been meeting down at the Stadium, of all places. They have... There's a restaurant up on the fourth floor.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: And, that's where they've been meeting.

MARTIN: And you're still active.

POWERS: Well, not really. I'm too lazy.

MARTIN: But, Mr. Beall was a member also?

POWERS: Yes, and he was... When he was alive he was quite active there.

MARTIN: Any controversy surrounding the Kiwanis Club?

POWERS: Well, none that I remember. Who is it that I am trying to think of that I saw just... I saw Dick Wolf when he had his party on New Year's. One of the few white members. Robert? Bob? [Interviewee raps his fingers.] I don't know him terribly well. That's why I can't remember his name. [ed: reference is to Robert Hughes.]

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: Okay.

MARTIN: That's what we earn from our years.

POWERS: I don't think it will come to me right away. [Referring to interviewer's list of questions] What were the major scandals on the Hill? Well, scandal is a big word. I don't remember any scandals.

MARTIN: Hot political issues?

POWERS: Oh, I don't know. Hot political issues on the Hill.

MARTIN: It seemed when... We came about the time that you did. We went through the waves of... It was a while before Hiram was born, the same with our daughters. But we went through the phases of renovation, the question of crime, where our kids would go to school, and now we're up to retirement.

POWERS: Well, there've always been people interested in, you know, statehood and that sort of stuff.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: But, there've never been enough of them.

MARTIN: Um-hmm.

POWERS: And, their chances of achieving something have never been great. Now, more recently, I understand... I just read the same papers you do... that the chances of getting a representative... Who do they have? We have a non-voting representative, don't we?

MARTIN: Eleanor Norton.

POWERS: Eleanor, yeah.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: She's smart lady.

MARTIN: Yes, she is.

POWERS: And she, I gather, she uses that position rather effectively.

MARTIN: She's working for us.

POWERS: Right. But, statehood, I think, is a non-starter, at least at the moment, the little I read. To have a voting representative, umm, I don't know. I read what you read. I think it unlikely. To have a Senator... That would...

MARTIN: We never even speak of the shadow senator that we have. We have one.

POWERS: Is there one?

MARTIN: There is.

POWERS: I wonder who it is.

MARTIN: I do, too. I don't know. What about race relations on the Hill, when you first came and how it evolved over the 30 years?

POWERS: Well, what was that time? Was it '68?

MARTIN: '68 was the riots.

POWERS: The riots, so-called riots. I went out... I was actually still over in Georgetown, I think. It was just before I moved over to A Street, Northeast.

MARTIN: But, that didn't stop you.

POWERS: No.

MARTIN: From moving to the Hill.

POWERS: No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Because that was vastly overdone in the press.

MARTIN: Um-hmm.

POWERS: It seemed to me. It was a tremendous press opportunity. I don't know whether there was a car burned, or something like that. It came and it went very quickly. And, apart from that, which was sort of a one timer, I thought race relations were rather good up here. No? I had a wonderful lady called Gentleness.

MARTIN: Gentleness?

POWERS: Gentleness. Well, that was the name given her by the head of her order, who was... The head of the order was known as Mother God. You know, when Gentleness got old and sick, Mother God just kicked her out. Isn't that awful? So, she died of abdominal cancer or something on her own. But, anyway, she was a wonderful lady.

MARTIN: What sort of organization was Mother of God?

POWERS: Mother God. Well, it was... It may have been descended from Daddy Grace, or one of those. It may have been an offshoot of Daddy Grace.

MARTIN: I don't know what that is.

POWERS: You've never heard of Daddy Grace?

MARTIN: No.

POWERS: In New York. It's a black organization. In any case, it doesn't matter.

MARTIN: Is it a separatist organization?

POWERS: It's a religious, a semi-religious organization. Black folks.

MARTIN: Humanitarian? Spiritual?

POWERS: Well, whatever. I don't know what they did.

MARTIN: All that.

POWERS: Yeah. All of the above.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

MARTIN: Mr. Powers was talking about a neighbor on the Hill named Gentleness.

POWERS: It wasn't a neighbor, it was a person that worked for us.

MARTIN: Ah.

POWERS: She lived with... Mother God had a house up on 16th Street, around P Street, and another place somewhere out in the country—I forget where—where they all lived. Anyway, that was just someone who worked for us. I forget how I inherited her.

MARTIN: Worked for you here at home?

POWERS: Yes.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: I first... She first worked for me when I lived in Georgetown.

MARTIN: Mm-hmm.

POWERS: I know. It was Justice, not Justice O'Connor, but one of the... In any case, it doesn't really matter. But I found out about her in Georgetown.

MARTIN: Mm-hmm.

POWERS: And she came and helped.

MARTIN: Can you make any comment about real estate values or real estate practices in the early '70s as compared to now? Real estate values? Any whopper stories you'd like to add?

POWERS: Well, they went up very slowly. They were not, the prices were not very high at first.

MARTIN: Mm-hmm.

POWERS: This was not considered... I think the flight to the suburbs was still continuing. I think people wanted to go out to the suburbs, the new suburbs.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: A few discerning individuals like myself...

MARTIN: Like us, right, who knew to stay.

POWERS: Like us. We knew this was a nice place to live and had all sorts of desirable qualities. And, you know, one thing that's always been true, once they got the subway built, the Metro built, I think for me anyway, for my purposes, public transportation is extremely convenient.

MARTIN: It certainly is.

POWERS: Both the bus and, to some extent, the Metro.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: Anyway.

MARTIN: Now, how did you get... Where was your office when you were Counsel for the Smithsonian?

POWERS: It was in the Castle.

MARTIN: Ah. Oh, how nice!

POWERS: Yeah. I could walk down there.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: Walk down.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: Take the bus up.

MARTIN: You didn't... Well, that's about a mile and a half, I guess, almost two miles.

POWERS: No.

MARTIN: Not right?

POWERS: It's less.

MARTIN: Is it? Uh-huh. That's right. I'm figuring from my house, which is almost a mile to the Capitol.

POWERS: Yeah. Well, no, and it was much better downhill.

MARTIN: Right, right.

POWERS: I forget how I got back up.

MARTIN: What a beautiful place to work!

POWERS: Not bad.

MARTIN: Do you visit?

POWERS: I don't, no. In the first place, it had got rather repetitive. The only thing I miss about it are my colleagues in the Office of the General Counsel, most of whom I appointed.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: They are really wonderful people.

MARTIN: And you keep in contact with them?

POWERS: A little bit.

MARTIN: Uh-huh. Any living here on the Hill also? Any smart folks like that?

POWERS: No. No. They live all around. They have families and stuff. But, a lot of them are women. I appointed a lot of women.

MARTIN: Good for you, Mr. Powers.

POWERS: I am a good boy.

MARTIN: That's good, yes. [Laughs] What are your favorite memories about living on Capitol Hill and deciding to stay? Were you ever tempted to leave?

POWERS: No. Why should I leave?

MARTIN: Good. All right. There you go.

POWERS: I mean, where would I go?

MARTIN: What are your favorite memories living here?

POWERS: Well, one thing we've done off and on and again—once you've done it once or twice, there's not much more to it—is to go down and look at the fireworks. It's very easy just to stroll down East Capitol Street and take a place. Sometimes, if you're really go-go, you can take a blanket and sit on the lawn or... But, once or twice is really enough. Fireworks tend to resemble each other. You know what I mean. Have you done that?

MARTIN: Oh, of course.

POWERS: If you've got kids, well, then, kids like fireworks. Okay.

MARTIN: Sure. Hiram would love it.

POWERS: But, fireworks are fireworks, and you get a little lazy after a while.

MARTIN: But, then there would be the concerts. The National Symphony would perform.

POWERS: Yeah. Pretty much oldies but goldies.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: Chestnuts.

MARTIN: Crowd pleasers. There's no question.

POWERS: Yeah, right, right.

MARTIN: What were the worst things about living on Capitol Hill years ago? I know there's none now [laughing]. Were there any?

POWERS: Well.

MARTIN: I love Nicky and Steve Cymrot's statement—when people, families move to Capitol Hill, they join Capitol Hill. I am so proud of that statement. I like to use it in a description. And, I'm sure you've felt the same way. There is that joining together.

POWERS: I guess, I guess.

MARTIN: But, are there any terrible things that you remember, that you'd want to tell somebody, say, from Nebraska, not living on the Hill?

POWERS: No. Well, no, nothing springs to mind. It would be in terms of whatever their expectations were, you know.

MARTIN: Mm-hmm.

POWERS: If they had some screwed up notion that they were going to walk down the street and see a lot of Congressmen...

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: Now, in fact you do, a certain amount, if you go around, wander around the Capitol office buildings.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: In fact, you do.

MARTIN: Sure.

POWERS: If you know what they look like, and most people don't.

MARTIN: They don't, right.

POWERS: Sometimes they know what Senators look like.

MARTIN: How many Congressmen, Congresswomen, and Senators lived on the Hill in the early '70s? Would you have any information on that?

POWERS: I have no idea.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: A few.

MARTIN: Now, Mr. Moynihan [Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Senator, New York] lived not far from you.

POWERS: Oh, I knew Pat, anyway, for a lot of reasons.

MARTIN: Uh-huh. And he lived here for years, didn't he?

POWERS: Yep. He always lived up here. Well, he moved down to that Eighth Street [Northwest] development at one point. Do you know what I'm talking about?

MARTIN: Eighth Street.

POWERS: On the other side of Eighth Street, there's... two blocks of flats went up. There's a Navy Memorial in the middle.

MARTIN: Oh, Eighth Street, Northwest. Oh, yes, I certainly do. Oh, he moved into the...

POWERS: Well, he moved up into there at one point before he died.

MARTIN: Right. 802 Pennsylvania Avenue.

POWERS: Something like that.

MARTIN: Yeah, I see, uh-huh.

POWERS: And his wife Liz. And he was a great pal of the man Charles Blitzer we had to deal with the house over there on A Street, Northeast, and, in theory, this house.

MARTIN: Um-hmm.

POWERS: Yeah.

MARTIN: But, most had lived in Northwest and McLean and Bethesda.

POWERS: I guess. I don't know where they lived.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: But, you could... If you strolled down... It was sometimes very irritating if you're coming up Constitution... or, is that right? Over here... and there's a roll call going on.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: They stop the traffic while all these young pols walk across the street to vote.

MARTIN: Right. That's before the elevator, or escalator, down there.

POWERS: Well, no, even now.

MARTIN: Pour out of the buildings to go vote, sure.

POWERS: Yeah, they can't be bothered to go underground.

MARTIN: Right. We got a certain thrill driving up Independence Avenue just as the impeachment votes were taken during the Clinton scandals. To think that that was being broadcast around the world and here we were, driving right next to the building where this was happening. I have to say that that sort of history does give me a sense of pride that I live right here on the Hill where it's all happening. What changes now on Capitol Hill do you approve of and what changes irk you the most about living on Capitol Hill?

POWERS: Well, the major change that's going on now is that people have finally gotten it straight that commuting in and out is a tremendous bore and time consuming. Because, even though they have improved the roads and blah-blah-blah-blah-blah-blah-blah, it still takes forever. So, I think people are moving in. And that's raising prices. And people say, "Oh, boy, your house must be worth a lot." I say, "Yeah, but, all it does is raise my taxes." But I don't care, I don't mind.

MARTIN: And we're not going anywhere.

POWERS: And I was talking to... it was only yesterday... who's our Sixth district [council member]?

MARTIN: Sharon Ambrose?

POWERS: Yeah, Sharon.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: And, they're going to cap it pretty low. They may even reduce the rate, she said. Like 10% increase.

MARTIN: Lower the rate of increase?

POWERS: There's a system whereby you're supposed to be assessed at market rates.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: But, you know what's happening to market rates on the Hill. Okay. One piece of it is to cap the increase per year out of that gross increase. That's the 10%.

MARTIN: And cap it at 10%.

POWERS: Well, use 10% as the amount that it can be increased each year. So, it will take a long time to get back up to... And the other is to reduce the rate itself. She said they might do both.

MARTIN: Have you any idea how much your house is worth now?

POWERS: I don't know. I've heard people say...

MARTIN: From \$55,000.

POWERS: What?

MARTIN: From \$55,000.

POWERS: I've heard people say 8 [hundred thousand] or 9 [hundred thousand], maybe. I don't know. It's not got any developed cellar, you know. It's not any... Lots of houses on the Hill, and maybe elsewhere, are financed by having an extra unit.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: This has no extra unit.

MARTIN: Do you have a basement?

POWERS: Not really. I mean, there is a basement.

MARTIN: I can't imagine a better address.

POWERS: But I can't even stand up...

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: ...straight in that basement. It's not that it's tiny, but it's low. It's not a developed basement.

MARTIN: What a fabulous place to live, right behind...

POWERS: Yeah, it's a nice place to live.

MARTIN: ...the Library of Congress, which I've... Reading this other transcript of the interview with Ruth Ann Overbeck that there was a possibility of the House and Senate office buildings coming this way.

POWERS: Oh, yeah. Well, that wasn't serious. There was a big... They made a big show and we made a big thing and... Yeah, and we won, in that sense. But... There was a lady who lived right across the street at that time, literally, in that house there, and she knew the Speaker [of the House of Representatives Carl Albert; the neighbor who knew Speaker Albert was Malvina Stevenson, a reporter from Oklahoma.]

MARTIN: I love that story. Tell that again.

POWERS: Oh, I don't know. I can't remember it. But, we had a big meeting at St. Mark's, including a well known black gospel singer, I think, and a lot of other folks, to get the message to Congress that this was not a good idea. But, you, know... And I was there.

MARTIN: Um-hmm.

POWERS: Restoration Society crowd and so on. A bit of everybody.

MARTIN: And Dick Wolf was there and Austin Beall?

POWERS: Oh, sure.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: Oh, the whole crowd.

MARTIN: The movers.

POWERS: Everybody was there. But, I'm not sure how serious a proposal it really was. It didn't make a hell of a lot of sense.

MARTIN: This was the late '60s. Is that...

POWERS: Like that.

MARTIN: Before... Was the Restoration Society established in the late... That was established in the '50s, so this would be a major issue for them.

POWERS: Oh, yeah.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: I think that's why I was there.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: But, you know...

MARTIN: So, this... the lady who attended then went back to whatever Congressman she was working for and pled her case and that ended it, because there would be no funding for such expansion...

POWERS: Something like that.

MARTIN: ...east... uh-huh.

POWERS: It wasn't a very good idea to start with.

MARTIN: But, you never know. These great decisions can take place in a fifteen minute period of time and then there'll be a course change.

POWERS: Well, it involved the Architect of the Capitol and people like that.

MARTIN: Um-hmm.

POWERS: It was like that other plan, that they should have federal office buildings marching down East Capitol Street.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: That was never very serious really. That was way back in the '50s apparently.

MARTIN: Uh-huh. Who are your friends whom you met right after moving to the Hill, who are still living on the Hill?

POWERS: Let's see.

MARTIN: Ottaways next door.

POWERS: Well, they weren't there at that time.

MARTIN: Ah. Margot Kelly, across the street.

POWERS: Ah, Margot Kelly. She's not really a friend, but she's an acquaintance.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: Oh, let's see [reading from the interviewer's list of questions], who are your friends? I forget the folks that were actually living next door. But, we haven't seen them for ages. They moved away. The Ottaways have been there quite a while. I guess Dick Wolf would be one.

MARTIN: Um-hmm. I think he's been interviewed. Can you think of questions that an interviewer should ask someone else about living on the Hill for the purposes of this oral history project? What questions did I miss?

POWERS: Oh, you've done a very good job. I don't know.

MARTIN: I know what I should ask you. What would be a typical day in the summer when Hiram would be at home? With whom would he play? What was... You know, after he came home from Peabody School, I know he took music lessons along with our daughter Sorin. But, can you give a... sketch what a typical day would be with raising Hiram here on the Hill.

POWERS: Well, I was working, you see.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: So, I don't remember.

MARTIN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: I wasn't here.

MARTIN: It was Kathryn and me doing those jobs.

POWERS: That's right.

MARTIN: Right. [Laughs.] And I loved it.

POWERS: Yeah.

MARTIN: And I have to add here that we lived... We raised our daughters on... We bought our house from Senator Stevens in 1981, moved to 1124 East Capitol Street. On our block there were 13 children.

POWERS: Wow.

MARTIN: They all went to Capitol Hill Day School or Peabody School and then on to Maret, Field, National Cathedral School. I think that's it. And, they have remained friends and all of them say... their families, most of them, are still living on that block... that they had the absolute best childhood they possibly could have because they were running in and out of each others' houses. They walked to school together. It was a village, a community like they could imagine no other.

POWERS: Yeah.

MARTIN: And when they'd visit friends in college, their family homes, they know that those friends did not have the fullness of the childhood that they had.

POWERS: I remember now that there was a certain amount of soccer.

MARTIN: Yes! Soccer is big on the Hill.

POWERS: Down... And there was a certain amount played on the Capitol grounds.

MARTIN: Mm-hmm.

POWERS: And the Capitol police, for a while, they closed one eye. And, then, at some point, I forget when exactly, they decided to call it off.

MARTIN: They did?

POWERS: Yeah. They kicked everybody off.

MARTIN: On the lawn on this side, on the east side of the Capitol? Eventually Summer's team got to play on the west side of that reflecting pool. But, they did get a permit to do that.

POWERS: Oh?

MARTIN: We have photos of them playing with the Capitol in the background. And, again, that just makes life here special.

POWERS: Well, it's all dug up now, as you know.

MARTIN: Yeah, right.

POWERS: And they cut down all those trees, which is really a shame.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: There were wonderful tulip trees, I think, and I don't know...

MARTIN: Oh, they'll be replaced. [Laughs]

POWERS: No.

MARTIN: When we first moved to the Hill in 1971, we moved here from Alaska and we lived at 417 A Street. And we had many, many guests because people loved the fact that we moved to Washington, D. C.

POWERS: Right here?

MARTIN: Right here. Uh, A Street Northeast. [417 A Street NE]

POWERS: Oh.

MARTIN: 417 A Northeast. And, a typical evening would be, when we had guests, or when we didn't have guests, is to take the dog... we had a Blue Tick Coon Hound at that time... to take the dog over to the Capitol lawn and... this is the truth. We would let the dog run outside, because the dog would stay, and we'd go in and we'd view the statuary and make a tour of the Capitol. There would be somebody at the entrance, at the desk, but merely to welcome us. And we wouldn't stay long because the dog was outside. And it was just... it was part of the things we did. We took advantage of the Capitol as something that we enjoyed each night.

POWERS: Yeah.

MARTIN: And, then, there was the threat in, I think, '72. Senator Stevens told us about the very serious threats that were being issued, terrorist threats against the Capitol at that time. And, then, do you remember, there was the bomb put in the men's room at the Senate. And that's when, I think that was '72. That's when things began to close down.

POWERS: Oh, [unintelligible], didn't we?

MARTIN: Yeah. Things really... I mean... The face of the Hill changes around the Capitol physically because of protection, but I would love people to remember how very open that was. And how Capitol Hill residents took advantage of that, going into those public buildings. We had breakfast at the Supreme Court. And they had this fabulous public cafeteria there. And we would take advantage of that.

POWERS: There's one up on top of the... Not the Interior building. If you go down Independence, the great big building on the left.

MARTIN: The Madison...

POWERS: Oh, it's the Madison Building [of the Library of Congress]. [unintelligible]

MARTIN: Yeah. Right. That's a fabulous cafeteria because of the views.

POWERS: Yeah.

MARTIN: Right.

POWERS: I haven't been there for years.

MARTIN: I just love living here. I mean, I'm going to take my daughters out for lunch before they go back to the Capitol. I think we'll go down to the Supreme Court. Have a good lunch there. But, anyway, I feel like you do. I feel very proud of living here.

POWERS: Yeah. Well, I didn't, so to speak, select it, like so many things in my life.

MARTIN: You what?

POWERS: I didn't decide I am going to live on Capitol Hill.

MARTIN: We didn't either.

POWERS: It just sort of happened.

MARTIN: It just sort of happened. We were going to only stay for the rest of Congressman Nick Begich's term. He was a Congressman from Alaska who, if you remember, died in the plane crash with Hale Boggs. And, we were going to go back to Alaska. But, Capitol Hill was so seductive, we made arrangements to stay for a bit longer. And, we did. We did go back to Alaska for a couple of years, but this is really where we wanted to be and raise our children. And I'm very happy I did, because I got to meet people like Kathryn Powers and Hiram and yay! And I got to join an organization as a volunteer to do an interview like this [laughing].

POWERS: Right. This is fun.

MARTIN: For which I thank you very much.

POWERS: Well, I hope it's been useful in some way.

MARTIN: It certainly is. And they... As you said, you didn't read the former transcript that you gave about the early years as president of the Restoration Society. They really appreciate that. This is the added interview to add information to that. And I just want to thank you very much. I appreciate it.

POWERS: My pleasure.

MARTIN: And I'm proud that I was asked to do this. Thanks again.

END OF INTERVIEW