



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK  
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

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**Interview with Nelson Rimensnyder**

**Interview Date:** October 3, 2005  
**Interviewer:** Nathaniel Kulyk  
**Transcriber:** Nathaniel Kulyk

TAPE 1/SIDE 1

**KULYK:** This is Nathaniel Kulyk. I am interviewing Mr. Nelson Rimensnyder for the Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project. It is October 3, 2005 and we're meeting at his house on 13 Sixth Street NE on Capitol Hill. To begin, if you could please tell me a little bit about your background and your education.

**RIMENSNYDER:** I was born in Philadelphia in 1943. And I was educated in the public schools there. And ... I got my undergraduate degree in history at Penn State University. Then I spent four years in the [U.S.] Army and came back to Penn State for graduate work in 1969 and '70 and came to Washington in 1970. But my first connection with the District of Columbia occurred when I was a senior in high school. And we had a course called "Problems of Democracy" which was civics, basically the federal government and local government. There was a section in our text about the District of Columbia. It was a little two or three pages as I recall and it was talking about the status of the city and they didn't have representation in Congress. They couldn't vote for president and they were essentially—their legislation was essentially directed and came out of Congress. This was kind of an anomaly in the political system of the country.

And in my senior year, we had to have a project and I chose, because what was to become the 23<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution was going through the state legislatures. And it was an amendment proposal to give the District of Columbia citizens the right to vote for electors for president of the United States as if they were a state. So I contacted the League of Women Voters in the state and they set up some interviews with my legislators in Harrisburg and I went to see them and talk to them and urge them to support the amendment when it was coming through Congress. It, Pennsylvania, became the 23<sup>rd</sup> state to ratify the 23<sup>rd</sup> Amendment in 1961 and that was the beginning of my association with the city. I didn't know at the time that I would eventually be moving to Washington and become very involved in the politics of the city and the movement for home rule and voting representation. In a very professional and personal way of course—after, in graduate school, I did federal and state budgeting—was the core program I took a master's of public administration—that was the emphasis.

And ... near the end of that, my work there—I was—we had a professor who had been in the institute of public administration at Penn State who was now, was then, at the Library of Congress and Congressional Research Service. And he invited me to come down for an interview to see if I'd be interested in working for the Congressional Research Service. I came down to Washington in the fall of 1969. And decided that yes, if they would offer me a position I would take it, and I did in early 1970, and moved to Washington.

Basically I began in what they called the Government Division there, answering questions about the federal budget, basically. I was there about six months and a call came in from Charles Diggs of Michigan

who was the senior Democrat on the Committee on the District of Columbia which was then chaired by John McMillan from South Carolina, an opponent of home rule. And it appeared that Diggs would probably become chairman in either that Congress or the succeeding Congress. And he wanted to talk to the “expert” on the District of Columbia in the Library of Congress. Well, they didn’t have one. So since I was sort of the last guy in the door, I was told, “You’re going to be the expert on the District of Columbia. Go talk to Congressman Diggs.” Which I did. And ... first meeting was about an hour. He had a lot of questions and I told him—I put together a reading list for him and materials which I did and took over to his office a week later. About a month later, he called and wanted to talk to me. He had read everything that I had given him, three or four books and numerous articles. Some research I had pulled together on my own. I found him to be a very vociferous reader and quite engaged intellectually in the subject. And, which stimulated my interest in research and really began a relationship of about ten years with Chairman Diggs. And looking into the relationship between Congress and the District of Columbia and the history of the home rule movement and what forms of government it had in the past and what kind of authority those governments had and so on. He gave me many questions to research.

One of the early ones I remember quite well was there was a perception in Congress that the home rule issue had only become a recent, sort of a civil rights issue. And that people, historically in the District of Columbia, the citizens here, really weren’t interested in home rule and having their own government, being represented in Congress, and so forth. Well, he had me research that and I found that that just was not true: that from the first day in 1801, when Congress withdrew the franchise here, citizens petitioned, met, had meetings, drew up petitions, took them to Congress and said, “We want a locally elected government and we want to be represented in Congress like the people in all the states. We want the same kind of political rights.”

And the—so in 1972 ... John McMillan was defeated in a primary and Charles Diggs became the chairman in 1973 of the Committee on the District of Columbia. That began the two year legislative process to write a home rule charter for the city, since now there was a chairman that would not block the reporting of a home rule bill. Diggs actually volunteered to go on the committee in 1963 with the idea that he could—he was in a safe district and he could get seniority eventually and outlive all the southern obstructionists who were on the committee over the years. And that’s exactly what happened. It took him ten years but that did occur. And then he wanted me to look into all kinds of city charters, compare them, and of course members of the committee all had their own ideas. They came from cities, many of them. Some of them had sat on city councils. We had one former mayor of a city on the committee. And so they all had ideas, their own, of what were the best forms of local government and whether it should be an elected mayor or an appointed city manager, elected council, all the different forms that you have come

into play. And it—Diggs himself interestingly had me research, of course, the different forms of government and all the proposals that had been made in Congress from over a 200 year period. There were many. And what we found was that from the very early days, Congress favored a governor and legislative assembly for the city. It never, early on, it didn't consider it a municipality in that sense. It considered it a district; in fact the early legislation called it the Territory of Columbia.

The first recommendation in 1800 of a joint committee was to have an appointed governor and an elected 25 member legislative assembly. But the local jurisdictions, there had been a city charter in Georgetown and one in Alexandria, they wanted to keep their charters and the mayors wanted to be able to keep their local power and they didn't want to concede it to a central government. And so they weren't successful, some of the early leaders in Congress, in getting it through. The local congressmen and senators from Virginia and Maryland, of course, had a lot of influence like they do to this day, in what goes on in the city of Washington and its local government, and were able to get laws enacted keeping the local charters in Arlington County, Alexandria City, Georgetown, and then created a City of Washington charter for the area now below what we call, was Boundary Street, and it's Florida Ave. But the idea of having a governor and a legislature was brought up over the years in Congress. In the 1870s, it was actually instituted. We had an appointed governor and an elected legislature. And, for various reasons, that ended in 1878 and an appointed government was put in. But the idea just kept cropping up.

In 1909 Theodore Roosevelt sent a message to Congress recommending that the District of Columbia be given an elected 25 member legislature and an appointed governor with the idea that maybe in the future it could be an elected office, the governorship. And it basically became, interestingly, a Republican idea and was brought up again when President [Dwight D.] Eisenhower came in. He recommended that form of government for the city. And Charles Matthias of Maryland, when he was in the House and the Senate, introduced and supported that concept for the city, because he thought that the city structurally and functionally was more like a state than it was a city. It had functions of a state. It issued birth certificates and licenses and so on like a state. It had courts, state level courts, and a penal system, and all the structures basically and functions of a state and should have the outlying state form of government. But the Democrats in Congress kind of took the other view, that no, it's a municipality; it should be a municipal form of government, a mayor and elected city council.

Later on, after home rule was passed and the statehood movement came in the vogue, it was interesting that the Democrats took on that [chuckles] idea, yes we should have a governor and a legislature. And by that time the Republicans weren't interested in that anymore. So we have a divide again, philosophically in Congress by party, on what form of government the city should have. But Diggs was very disappointed

that he wasn't able to persuade members of the committee to go with that form of government, that is a governor and elected legislature.

**KULYK:** Out of your research on the concept of home rule what would you have recommended to the committee—what did you think was the best course of action?

**RIMENSNYDER:** Well, I agreed with Diggs and the Republicans, that the elected governor and elected legislature was the way to go. It reflected more the structure and the functions and the responsibilities of the local government here. And that it would also give the chief executive a little more clout in dealing with Congress and maybe getting support from fellow governors around the states for voting representation for example. And give the District, you know, a little higher status and respect from its form of government. It—but as I say ... I wasn't asked specifically for my views. They were more reflected through Chairman Diggs and his advocacy of that form of government. But the materials that I did give him he did use. He cited Theodore Roosevelt and Eisenhower and tried to remind the Republicans and get the Democrats to support that form of government. He also gave me many other things to look into ... for, you know, in the electoral process.

One of the major issues that he was interested in was having runoff elections. He didn't think that it would be healthy for the local government to have people to be running in primaries and winning with less than 50% of the vote, then going on to win, which was, for all practical purposes, what we knew was going to be a one-party system here for the immediate future, if not for many years. And that the primary would be then tantamount to the election of the city council members and the mayor. There was a lot of support for that in the House Committee but none on the Senate side. The chairman of the DC Committee on the Senate side, Thomas Eagleton of Missouri, a Democrat, was just completely opposed to runoffs. He thought that they were wasteful and unfortunately he was supported in this by the League of Women Voters of the District of Columbia, who said that the city couldn't afford the cost of runoffs, that runoff election would be like \$200,000, for an extra election if you had to have a runoff. And I thought at the time that was a very—for the League of Women Voters to take that stand that elections were [laughs] too costly, I thought they were in the business of [laughs] elections and voting. But I found out that they weren't [chuckles], in this case anyway.

And it—interestingly the biggest ally we had in the local political scene was Marion Barry. He testified twice before the Committee on the District of Columbia in favor of runoffs. He made all the arguments though—it's counter, it's not democratic, it's one man one vote you've got to get the 50 plus one, that's our system of government, majority rule and so on and so forth. What's interesting is that if that had become part of the home rule charter, Marion Barry probably would not have been elected mayor. When

he went up in 1978, there were three strong candidates, the incumbent Mayor [Walter] Washington, the Chair of the City Council, Sterling Tucker, and Marion Barry who had been elected to the City Council and was the Chair of the Finance Committee. And he had a very outstanding record as Chair of the Finance Committee. He did some very important work there. So there were three strong candidates in the Democratic primary. And it broke down very close. It was like 33, 32, 31% I think. Marion Barry had 33, Sterling Tucker 32, Walter Washington 31. And if he had gone up against the two, I don't think either one, I think it was pretty close. He either would have been up against Walter Washington or Sterling Tucker and I don't think he would have been elected over either one. But I don't know that, but he would have had a pretty tough election anyway. And there's a very good chance he would not have been elected mayor.

**KULYK:** To shift gears slightly, could you describe the significance of the House District of Columbia Committee aside from discussing the home rule charter, what were the other issues that the committee looked at while you were there?

**RIMENSNYDER:** Well, of course I was with the committee for 20 years. After the home rule bill went through, you know, then we had, still had a lot of jurisdiction, the Congress still does, even under home rule. And ... the biggest issue that was going on in the 20 years I was with the committee, and still is important, is the federal contribution to the local budget and commonly referred to as the federal payment. It's a payment that's been made in various forms over 200 years to the local government. It's a payment in lieu of taxes essentially. The federal government cannot be taxed. So it's a payment in lieu of for federal land that's off the tax roll, for limitations on development like the building height—Congress regulates the heights of buildings of the city, doesn't allow them to go over 160 feet. So we don't have skyscrapers here. So that affects the tax base. And there are all the embassy properties and international organizations that are off the tax rolls and a lot of other organizations here that are not taxed. So that payment historically has been .... And for a while it was regularized until about the 1920s, it was 50% of the local budget was directly out of the federal treasury each year appropriated by Congress, and it began to diminish and by the time home rule came along it was running about 10 to 15% in that range. So when the home rule bill was going through, the House and the Senate disagreed on how to handle this. The House wanted a formula-based federal payment that would be a fixed amount each year that the city would get of the percentage of the locally raised revenue at 25% and then I think going up to 35 and eventually 40%. The Senate had a little different idea on that. It looked more like what they call a "lump sum," just looking at the budget each year and seeing what the problems were and what the needs of the District government were and coming up with some calculation. So that was something we worked on for the next 20 years when I was with the committee and it's never been completely resolved to this day. It's

still an issue, legislation is introduced every year in the House and the Senate to deal with this and it just has not been resolved to the satisfaction of the local government.

Part of the issue with it is, of course, there's a prohibition in the home rule charter that the District cannot tax people who work in the District during the day but live outside the city. Historically this was also considered part of the federal payment. The representatives and the senators from Virginia and Maryland would always argue that the federal payment should be generous because of this prohibition in the city charter that they couldn't tax their constituents who work in the city during the day and then go home to their districts in Maryland and Virginia in the evening. And so that's still an issue that's brought up, the commuter tax, as it's called. And that hasn't been resolved. Quite frankly, I don't see it happening, it's just, as long as—unless the District were to achieve statehood where it would have that power as a state—as long as it remains the District of Columbia under the Constitution where Congress has the ultimate authority for legislation here, the suburban members of—the two senators from Maryland and Virginia and even West Virginia and now even people from Pennsylvania drive down here to work [chuckles] in the city—they're going to protect their constituents as they see it, and we're just not going to be able to tax people who work in the city during the day but live elsewhere. So I think the emphasis has to be on trying to achieve compensation for that inequity through the federal payment. And as I say, that's still an ongoing issue.

And it ... when the government went insolvent in the mid-1990s, part of it was resolved and the federal government did take over some of the funding for prisons and the prosecutorial system. That took some of the financial burden off of the local government. But it's not considered by local officials to be anything near what the city really needs, a direct contribution from the federal government. So that's going to go on and on, that issue and it—I don't see it being resolved in the near term. I think it will be incrementally solved, bits and pieces, but there won't be some overall major legislation dealing with it—that it will be dealt with in piecemeal over the years. And, so that's the finances, as I say, a major continuing issue and always will be, because of these constraints on the local government here and revenue opportunities.

**KULYK:** One of the important issues that was being addressed during the 1950s and 1960s were issues dealing with transportation, new highways for the District of Columbia and then later on the Metro. What role did you play in transportation issues when you were there?

**RIMENSNYDER:** I wasn't here in the 1960s when the major citizen activity was going on, opposing the proposed highway systems, the interstates and the, what they called the Inner Beltway going around the White House and through Capitol Hill and over 11<sup>th</sup> Street and [Interstate] 95 coming through and the

Three Sisters Bridge coming into Georgetown. But it was, still hadn't been completely resolved. The ... Three Sisters Bridge particularly lingered on into the time I was here into the 70s. That was the last big fight of the highway lobby, they said "We want that, we've given up on some of the others, but we want that bridge through." And the connecting road which would have gone through some of downtown and really been like a Chinese wall ... Great Wall of China, as I said, all through downtown. That part the highway lobby was still fighting for and its pleader in the DC Subcommittee of Appropriations was Natcher from Kentucky. William Natcher. And Diggs set up a meeting with Mr. Natcher and myself in 197 ... after the home rule bill went through—about six months later—early 1975. We talked for some time, and Diggs and Natcher agreed that I would do some research and that Natcher, we could see from that meeting that he was coming around to finally abandoning his opposition to it. But what he wanted to see was a hundred or more cosponsors on an authorization bill for Metro. And he wanted, you know, he kind of threw that down. He said "If you can show that there's support, major support in Congress for funding this subway system, then I'll go along with it."

The Nixon Administration was also very helpful at this time. And John Mitchell in particular, who people wouldn't know that, but he came up with an idea of getting the funding started with some bonds. And kind of the idea, let's get some holes in the ground, and it'll be easier to get Congress. We'd be working in Congress to get sponsors on the authorizing legislation for the appropriations. And he was able to do that, to get some bonds, several hundred million dollars for the authority and they began construction with the bonds without, in lieu of, before they actually received federal funding.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

**KULYK:** This is Nathaniel Kulyk. I'm interviewing Nelson Rimensnyder for the Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project. This is side two of tape one. It is still October 3 and we're still meeting at his house on Capitol Hill. So if you will please continue.

**RIMENSNYDER:** Okay. The, as I was saying ... William Natcher agreed that if there could be a way found to get some interim funding that he would not oppose that. And in the meantime, President [Richard M.] Nixon had directed his Attorney General Mitchell, who had been a bond lawyer in New York for many years—and Nixon knew that because he'd been in his law firm with him—to find a way to get some bonds together to begin the construction of Metro. And that's exactly what happened. I think the first initial bond offering was for \$200 million and it got the construction started. It got the holes in the ground downtown and by 1975 work was going on.

On the Hill we were able to get widespread support for the system, for authorization, and the first appropriations, I think, began to come through in 1976 and Metro was on its way. The ... and the Three Sisters Bridge finally did ... die its own death. And it, there just—by that time the whole thinking was beginning to change about cities and highways cutting through them. The highway lobby just didn't have that kind of clout anymore for this type of construction, especially in Washington, but I think in other cities too, that they had seen enough of that—of the interstates cutting through downtown areas and so forth and uprooting and dividing neighborhoods, that thinking had just changed considerably. And as I say, I think for the better. The ... and in 1979, I think it was Stark-Harris [name of legislation] we got another big appropriation for it and that ... and I think the funding actually went up to 80/20% formula, 80% paid going from federal government appropriations, 20% were raised from the local jurisdictions. That began to set the pattern for other systems in other cities too in support and it was the beginning of a major breakthrough to have that kind of a funding formula. And it, as I say, significantly enabled the system to be completed. It's ... and of course now there are ideas around, you know, extending it to Dulles and so forth, and it's still a very big interest of the local congressional delegation. And it—they came up with a very good, the local delegation, it was Harris of ... Congressman [Herbert] Harris of Virginia, "America's Subway," when they were fighting for the formula in 1979, he said it's really America's subway. Look at all the tourists that come here and after all would you have a stop at a cemetery normally on a subway system? No, but we have Arlington National Cemetery, that's a major tourist destination and that's why we have a stop there. And it—statistics began to come out that tourists were using the system widely and are still to this day major users of the system. So that idea did help selling it in Congress, calling it "America's Subway." And I think they have signs in the subway today, I think, calling it that, I think. I seem to remember that, I'm not sure. I'd have to go look [laughs] next time I'm there. But I think they actually have logos now calling it "America's Subway."

But that—going back, just mentioning Nixon's interest—presidents are very important in helping the District of Columbia in matter like this and their interest can be very very crucial. Basically, governors who are presidents do not understand the city and do not appreciate the city as well as presidents who have been members of Congress. An exception to that is Eisenhower. But Eisenhower lived in the city quite a bit while he was in the army. And actually in Washington and came to be familiar that the—they didn't have home rule here, they didn't have a locally elected government, the city was segregated and so forth. When he became president, one of his first messages to Congress was for home rule and voting representation. Of course the governor concept and legislature, but also representation in Congress and voting for the president. He was only able to get through the vote for president, which went through in 19—his last year in office, 1969 [ed: 1959]. But in his memoirs, he mentions that that's one of his proudest accomplishments, getting the vote for president for residents of the District of Columbia. He

says it's not enough, it's unconscionable that they can't have representation in Congress and a local elected government. But hopefully that'll come and of course some of it has.

The—both Presidents Kennedy and Nixon interestingly, served on the House DC Committees in both the House and the Senate when they were members of Congress. So they understood this relationship and were very supportive of home rule and representation. Nixon sent an early message to Congress saying they should have a local elected government, full representation in Congress, two senators, representatives, and locally elected government. And ... two major pieces of that did get through in his tenure as president, the delegate and the local elected government. He signed both of those pieces of legislation and recommended the Congress that they enact that legislation.

Jimmy Carter came along; he was a governor and vetoed the DC Pension bill. That was one of the big liabilities that was transferred to the local government under home rule, this big unfunded pension liability of the local government. We finally got a bill together and through both houses of Congress ... appropriating money to cover that pension liability and he vetoed it. Even though he had had a task force chaired by his Vice-President, [Walter] Mondale, that recommended that he sign the legislation. And it's just—to this day we don't know who had his ear on it or was his own idea but he vetoed that legislation. It took years to get other legislation through that was not nearly as comprehensive and, in addressing that part of the financial burden of the local government. And, but again, I think it was just he didn't understand the local relationship and how this obligation developed and that it really wasn't the fault of the local officials that imposed on them. But that's the kind of thing that happens when .... [Ronald] Reagan and [Bill] Clinton, both governors, the same thing. They just didn't show much interest in the city at all. Neither of them ever sent a message to Congress recommending voting representation for the city as other presidents had.

Now we have President [George W.] Bush, another governor, who seems to be in the same mold, is just not interested in supporting voting rights here. And it's important, because we can see when presidents do get behind this legislation, like Nixon and Eisenhower, it can be very very helpful in getting support in Congress for voting rights and home rule powers in the city. And also for getting involved in the financial issues. The ... and support for the city financially. But that seems to be a basic pattern that.... Lyndon Johnson was also very supportive of the city and recommended home rule and voting representation. Did get the city government reorganized in 1967 with an appointed city council and mayor commissioner, which kind of got the framework going for what became an elected local government a few years later. He wasn't able to get an actual elected home rule government through, but he did try to persuade Congress to do that, he made it a major issue.

And it—presidents can also be very influential in getting these issues into the party platforms. And that's been helpful over the years to have in the party, Republican and Democratic party platforms, these issues of representation and home rule for the District of Columbia. So presidents, as I say, can be very ... remain very important and can be very helpful. Or they can just not show any interest which ... doesn't help the situation as I see it in the city and getting the financial aid the city needs and getting more voting rights. For instance now there's a bill that's getting some bipartisan support in the House, H.R. 2043, which would give the District of Columbia a vote in the House of Representatives. And the local Republican Party and other Republicans in Congress are trying to get President Bush to come out and support that legislation. If he would do that, it probably would get through the House and have a good chance in the Senate. But without presidential support, it, these big issues concerning voting rights for the city really don't go anywhere. They really need the support of the president and the, putting his administration behind it and getting up on the Hill and lobbying for it. I think this an administration bill that we want, you know, reported out, and vote for it. And it ... it's so, as I say, presidents remain very important. And they have historically. It's one of the issues that Diggs had me look into early on, all the way back to John Adams and Jefferson who were the first presidents here really when they started to set up local government in the city.

**KULYK:** Were there any other issues that you worked on that had an impact here with your own neighborhood here on Capitol Hill?

**RIMENSNYDER:** Well, the transfer of RFK [Robert F. Kennedy] Stadium, since baseball is in the news now, comes to mind. That took quite a while. The Interior Department didn't want to give up RFK Stadium. They wanted to keep control of it and there was a lot of sentiment in the committee, in the District of Columbia—on the House side that it be transferred to the city. And quite frankly, with the idea that it would help the city attract a baseball team, if it could have ownership of the stadium it would be a ... a help in its negotiating to get a team here. That legislation finally did pass in 1987. But it was something we began working on in the committee right after the home rule bill went through and it took us 10, 12 years to get it through.

The other thing that's not too far from the Hill is the whole St. Elizabeth's complex. That we finally got transferred, half of it at least, to the city in, I think that finally went through about 1990. And—but there were a lot of encumbrances on that land, all the historic buildings and so forth and nothing's really happened out there. Now the federal government's beginning to get interested in it again and maybe keeping control of it, maybe taking control of some of the land that it did transfer, in that it's a large piece of land and it would be, for security purposes, it could be secured much easier because you'd have a large land that's not like a building in downtown Washington. And it was one of the suggested sites for the

Homeland Security Department which eventually may go there. They're talking now about the Coast Guard being located there. So there's this tug, push and tug and pull between the federal government and local government. The local government would like more of that land to be freed up for commercial and residential development. And, so that hasn't been completely resolved and is an ongoing issue. And, as I said, the part that's been transferred to the city has quite a few historic buildings on it and it can't really go in there and tear them down. They'd be very expensive to rehabilitate, many of them. And so it's quite likely the major development out there may be federal installations and not commercial and residential, although I think they'll be some of that but not as much as the city might like in the long term. But, and of course that's the ... and along with that, it was the closing of St. Elizabeth's Hospital and the whole idea ... that's being reconsidered now too, you know, having a major mental hospital, that was a debate that went on in the 70s and 80s, the institutionalization it was called, on having people with mental difficulties hospitalized but out in the community in various ways. And half-way houses, where they could be working part time maybe and so on. And that's ... that's swinging back now and there's some, you know, that's been discredited somewhat by many writers in the field and now there's an idea, yes there should be some kind of permanent hospital, maybe not as large as we had in the past, but there's some people that just need that constant care and supervision and ... being out in the community is not a solution for everybody. It's compounded the homeless problem in some ways. Many of the homeless are people who might be better off in a hospital-type situation where they're, they have some supervision and ... but, you know, their medication is taken on a regular basis and so forth and doctors do look at them on a regular basis. So that's, that may—there may be a major hospital coming back to the St. Elizabeth's ground in the future too. That has not been completely resolved.

**KULYK:** Because there are historical buildings there, what would you like to see happen to the land?

**RIMENSNYDER:** It ... well, I'd like to see mixed, you know, use of it. I think there should be some federal use of it, especially if it, you know, creates jobs for people in that part of the city. It, you know, of course, helps the commercial base too if you're going to have commercial, if you do have a block of federal employees there, that's, they can help support some local commercial activity. The ... historic buildings may be, maybe one of them could be a—there is a nucleus there of—in one building of a history of the treatment of the mentally ill in this country and how it evolved. I'd like to see that building upgraded and that collection made available for research and have a museum component where people can come and see what the history of treating mental illness has been. Of course, St. Elizabeth's was a pioneer in that, Dorothea Dix and the federal government did set up that hospital and did support it with appropriations for over 100 years. And so maybe that's, you know, one building, that's what they call the old Central Building, could be a museum.

There's another building out there that people that are interested in setting up a National Fire Museum had been looking at it and trying to get some support for having a fire museum out there. So these would be some cultural and research areas that maybe could be developed there. And of course I like museums and [chuckles] I'd like to see maybe those two buildings that people are looking at become museums. The one building was, as I say, a sort of an unofficially functioning museum, parts of it, when the hospital was there. And there was a curator and so on on staff who—and it was more by appointment, it wasn't a museum that was open to the public on a regular basis. But it was available by appointment to see. So there is a large collection that I think is still intact there, I'm not sure. Probably the roof is leaking and who knows what's going on. So I'd like to see that collection preserved and taken care of that I think is still out there. If I was still working on the Hill I would, that'd be something I'd be trying to keep up to date on and seeing what's going on with it.

But the other piece of legislation I worked on, I guess, which is more pretty—affects the Capitol Hill neighborhood and ... affected it, was the transfer of some of the properties and some initial financial support for the [Capital] Children's Museum, over on the Third and H [Streets NE], I guess, approximately. That's, of course, has changed, that's property now that's being developed. And I'm not sure where the Children's Museum is or what's happened to it. But that was a very successful project for a number of years and ... I was involved in the legislation getting the museum to have access to that property. And ... it, as I say, I'm not sure what's happened now to the National Children's Museum. But it was very popular. My children, all who grew up on the Hill, three children, and went to the public schools here all went to various programs there. I went to quite a few of them with them and found it a very interesting and vital part of the community for many years. Sorry to see it gone now, at least for the time being. And that property is now being developed as condominiums, I think Senate Square or something it's called. And ...

**KULYK:** Well, what other parts of this community would you consider important or significant?

**RIMENSNYDER:** Well, of course ... the committee, we were always looking with, you know, the whole of the city. And how it was planned and developed and what role Congress should have in that. It's had a very important role historically and of course with the idea of what under home rule, what parts of, you know, would be under federal jurisdiction and local jurisdiction, how zoning, you know—would the federal government be bound by the planning, zoning of the city and where and how. Some of that was thrashed out in the home rule bill, not all of it. The National Capitol Planning Commission for example was made—more of its members became local members appointed by the mayor. It's now about half and half, I think about six are local members and six are federal, appointed by federal agencies and the

president. The others are appointed by the mayor. And so that jurisdiction is shared. But there, as I say, there are other aspects of it.

The building heights issue was a major consideration in the Home Rule Act. The council was not given authority to change the Building Heights Act of 1910. And the idea was to study it for two years and see if certain parts of that should be given to the local government but it's never, never happened, even though we did do a big study on it in the committee recommending that in certain areas of the city, the local government be given authority to take buildings up to 250 feet. But that's never happened. There's always been a, usually, a handful of members in the House and Senate that are very protective of the Building Heights Act. They think it's a very important element of the—really going back to L'Enfant Plan. Building heights were regulated from the very earliest years of the city.

In 1800, there were regulations promulgated at the recommendation of President [Thomas] Jefferson, who had been the ambassador in Paris during the Revolution and observed that there were building height regulations in Paris. And he thought that was a essential part of the city and he thought that made the city much more attractive and nicer light and they talked about light and air in the streets and recommended that Congress institute regulations and it did. It authorized the president to issue building regulations for the city and part of those early regulations were that buildings be limited to no more than the width of the streets and in certain areas of the city be between 35 and 40 feet, I think it was, and that buildings be of brick or stone.

And ... this was interestingly enough for private construction. It didn't affect federal construction. So buildings went up that of course that went over that, like the Treasury Building, the White House itself exceeded those heights, the Capitol, of course. And so it didn't affect federal construction, but private construction. So it didn't become an issue until structural steel came in and all that in the 1880s and 90s and the Cairo Hotel was built and I think it went to about 160 feet and then Congress looked at it and said, "Oops, we don't want buildings that high." What was going on in Chicago and they passed the Building Heights Act in 1910, which has been in effect ever since, which limits construction to, I think it's the width of the street plus 20 feet for maximums. And it does allow 160 feet on the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and the Capitol, that's one exception. But that's why the city to this day does not have any building more than basically 110-130 feet in that range downtown.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2

TAPE 2/SIDE 1

**KULYK:** This is Nathaniel Kulyk. I'm interviewing Nelson Rimensnyder for the Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project. It is October 3, 2005. We are at his house on 13 Sixth Street NE, on Capitol Hill. This is side one of tape two. So to continue with our discussion, if you could describe for me a little bit about the working relationship that existed between Congress and the District of Columbia Committee and the various mayors of Washington and if there were any differences between that relationship ... those relationships.

**Rimensnyder:** Yes. Well, the first mayor was Walter Washington within the appointed mayor and then became the first elected mayor. And he had been in Washington for many years. He wasn't a native Washingtonian, but he had spent most of his professional life here. So he'd been in Washington for about 30 years before he became mayor. He married into a local family ... heir of an old time Washington family. So he had pretty strong roots here. And his approach was, he didn't want to embarrass or get confrontational with members in public but he was very strong in making his points, you know, privately with members and was very effective in many ways. It's, I think is not appreciated, because his style, of course, was quite different than that of his successor, Marion Barry, who ... would, you know, say things in public to members that was not helpful to the city—put it that way. He ... came to the city in the 1960s and got very involved in the home rule movement here. And his rhetoric was really quite harsh and ... it didn't help in Congress in many ways and that kind of continued when he was mayor. He ... then of course got into difficulties with drugs and so forth and was eventually indicted. And there were a lot of things going on in the administration. A lot of people were, you know ... there were a lot of sweetheart contracts going on and things like that and the city was just getting a very bad reputation, not only here but around the country. Many members of Congress became quite upset about the fact that how this affected the reputation of the capital city. And they are protective of that and concerned about that.

And it, of course, his first term—Marion Barry's first term—was quite different from those that came afterwards. He did come in as a reformer in many ways and was starting out that way and ... but that didn't hold. It became really a government of a lot of cronyism and it—and things went downhill. It made things very difficult for us working on the Hill for what we'd call “friends of the city” who wanted to get a federal payment through, wanted to get more representation in Congress for the city, more home rule powers. For example, there was a lot of sentiment for having the mayor appoint local judges and there was a lot of support for that in the Senate and some in the House. And that might have become reality. But the years, latter years, especially of the Barry administration, that just wasn't going to happen and didn't happen. Now there's not a lot of support for that in Congress, unfortunately. But that was a key

power that we might have gotten. And the power to prosecute local crimes, which is now handled by the U.S. Attorney, a presidential appointee. We might have also gotten that authority. But now it's thought, I think the thinking in Congress is that that should remain in federal control so that you won't have a situation where the local prosecutor's appointed by the mayor and might not look as closely into reports of alleged corruption in the city.

Then he [Marion Barry] was succeeded by Sharon Pratt Kelly who was local, she was born and raised here, and ... came in, was very well liked. But just wasn't able to get people in the government to get a handle on the finances and come to Congress with a balanced budget. All kinds of gimmicks were employed and the budget got very very out of balance. By the mid 1990s, as I say, the city was insolvent. And, got to the point where it just wasn't able to pay some of its bills. It was working on a completely cash-oriented system, where if the cash came in they would pay bills, but not, a lot of them not on time. And salaries were being paid, but a lot of contracts weren't being honored and so forth and it ... and so that had a great impact on what we were able to do and eventually, of course, the Control Board was brought in, in 1995, to take over the finances and have an appointed comptroller and, to really get a handle on the finances of the city.

Of course the current mayor [Anthony Williams] came through that system. And ... was able to get the books and budget balanced and get systems in place to manage the money better. And, of course, he was the chief financial officer under that Control Board and became the elected mayor in 1998, I guess he was elected. First term. And is finishing his second term now, and of course, just announced that he will not run for reelection. But the city has now had five years of balanced budgets and is running surpluses. Of course a lot of that has to do with the booming real estate values which they have some adverse effects. Not positive in the long run on the city, and the kind of people who live here, like me, I'd like to stay here in my retirement. I don't know if I'll be able to pay the escalating property taxes.

Mayor Williams has had a very very good relationship with Congress. He's, and with presidents, even though President Bush has not been supporting voting representation. It has been supportive of other legislation, giving the city more authority in its budgeting process, for example, and getting the Appropriations Committees less involved in the city. President Bush has supported that approach. Transferring some unused federal land to the city for residential and commercial uses, he's been very supportive of that. So they've had a very good working relationship. Some other things that with mixed support for the city was the voucher system, the mayor has supported the president on that, getting voucher system instituted in the city. Legislation for treating, putting money up for local residents to go to out of state schools, to help with their tuition, that's been an administration initiative supported by the mayor.

So there's been a lot of this administration, it's a Republican administration, and this mayor, a Democrat, have worked very well together in many, many areas. It, as I say, in everything except the voting representation for the city, which remains a disappointment of mine and many in the city, that the Bush Administration does not support that, even though his grandfather, Prescott Bush, was a very strong advocate when he was a senator from Connecticut. He was a leader in the Senate for getting a vote for president, for example, for the District of Columbia. Bush is really breaking with the tradition of the Republican Party, the support of voting rights for the city. The Republican Party since its founding in 1854 has always supported voting representation and home rule for the city. And it's only been in recent years and under this president particularly that it's not been supportive. But, on economic issues, this president has been very helpful to the city. We've been, the mayor has requested on numerous occasions that extra money be given, appropriated to the city, for demonstrations and inaugural events and major federal activity. And the Bush Administration supported those appropriations. So there's been a very positive relationship overall and at many levels with this president and our current mayor. Whether that will continue with the next mayor remains to be seen. But this relationship has been quite good.

**KULYK:** There are many members of Congress and the staff who work for them, who represent constituents who live hundreds and sometime even thousands of miles away, while the constituents that you've worked for over the years, through your work, live just a stone's throw away from Congress here in our backyard. Did that have a profound impact on you in any way—knowing that the work you were doing directly affected people who live in the same neighborhood that you do?

**RIMENSNYDER:** It ... well, you know, I, it was ... my job at the time. I mean I ... do these things. There were staff on, you know, other members of Congress who, you know, were very helpful in getting support for a lot of this legislation that came from other parts of the country, served on the committee, some of them not on the committee. Stuart McKinney of Connecticut for example, a Republican, was very supportive of Metro and federal payment and almost all these issues we've talked about today. And other members of the DC Appropriations Committee for example, and most all the members, the chairman of that over the years came from other parts of the country, California and Michigan and other states quite distant. Yet they took an interest and were very supportive of the city in many ways.

The one thing that I guess the committee staff was involved in a lot early on, on the committee when I went there in 1973 were complaints from constituents through members' offices who had come to the city for one reason or another, maybe as tourists or on business. Maybe their car was towed or they ... we used to get a lot of complaints about cabs, people who felt they were overcharged and taken for rides around the city and not taken on the shortest route and things like that, we used to get a lot of complaints about that. And we would get into that. We got into taxicab regulations and trying to reform some of that.

Most of those now, I understand, of course, it became that way when I worked in the committee too, were referred to the city.

The mayors have developed a staff over the years to handle these complaints from members and do so. That's been very helpful to the city in its relationship with Congress—that these things are looked into by the city government, and answer of some kind, or response of some kind, or action of some kind that the member thinks is reasonable occurs. The taxicab situation still hasn't been fully resolved, but the city's been trying for years to get meter cabs for example, that thinks this would take away this problem of the zoning system and its, how that can be abused and how visitors can't understand it and so forth. And it, there are many members on the committee when I were there wanted to do that. You know, unilaterally, without—just enact it and pose that the, legislatively, that the cabs in the District be fitted with meters. But that's deferred to the local government in that matter, which I say still hasn't resolved it. And it, whether we're going to get meters or not, I don't know. It's, every year it seems like we're on the verge of getting meters in cabs, but it hasn't happened yet. So that's something that the city government has taken very seriously and responding to these and the mayor in meeting with members on various issues always brings that up, this mayor and, at least that I've been aware of, says you know, “call my office and we'll look into it. If you have a constituent that has a complaint, held to the city for any reason, we'll look into it.” But ... that's, I guess, as far as I can think of the mayors and the relationship between ... but it's just very important. The members feel that the image of the city is very important and the mayor reflects very, centrally, the image of whatever that is, conveys.

It ... Marion Barry, quite frankly, was a nightmare for us on the Hill, in working and trying to get things for the city. It was a ... about eight, ten years that we weren't able to move any major legislation at all that we wanted to, to help the city. And I hope that that doesn't happen again.

**KULYK:** What do you suppose your greatest accomplishment was over the years for the committee or for the people of DC?

**RIMENSNYDER:** Well, I probably we're sitting in it. You know, assembling this collection that I call the “National Capital Archive.” It's now in 90 boxes. We're sitting, it's around us and it's underneath us in the garage below us. And it began from that first meeting with Charles Diggs in 1971 where he wanted to meet the local expert on the District of Columbia. And I had to become that expert for [chuckles] better or worse and I did. And have accumulated this collection of research. A lot of it is in the areas we discussed today, the whole movement from, of the citizens petitioning Congress for voting representation and home rule going all the way back to 1800. All the proposals and hearings on home rule and voting representation had been held over the last 200 years. Some of it was in the committee records, some of it

was in the House library which was disbanded about the same time that the committee was in 1994. This was all in two office buildings in the Ford Building.

I had left the committee in 1992. '94 as I said it was disbanded and staffers called me up and said "Rimey, your research is all being hauled out of here and it's going into the dumpsters. What do you want to do?" And so, well, I borrowed a truck, and went to the Hill and retrieved, got some boxes together and retrieved it from the, some of it was in boxes, but a lot of it was just thrown in off the shelves, and brought it here. And it's been here ever since. In the last couple of months I've been trying to begin to catalog it, see what I really want to save, and would like to get a relationship with an institution or a university to take it under its wing as a collection. What it really is, is a 200 year history of the relationship between Congress and local government in the District of Columbia and the people in the District of Columbia. I think it, a lot of it can be used to advocate things we've been talking about, a federal fair and equitable and predictable federal payment for the city, which is still an ongoing issue. Voting representation in Congress, equivalent to that of a state, at least initially representation in the House and then maybe then some kind of, coming up with some kind of mechanism for representation in the Senate. Maybe short of two senators initially but maybe a delegate in the Senate to begin with. It's all here, all the proposals that have been made over the years. Some of the proposals got through one house and not another at various times.

In the meantime, I would like, as I say, to begin to catalog some of this myself. Some areas that I begin to do some writing of my own. I have been working indirectly with Tom Davis's committee, Government Operations, his bill H.R. 2043 which would give us a vote in the House and I've been putting together materials about the Republican Party and how they've supported voting representation over the history of the party. And getting quotes from presidents and so on and so forth who helped support that bill. So this material is, at the current time, being used on that, being very helpful in promoting that piece of legislation, which I'd like to see enacted in this Congress or the next.

**KULYK:** Do you believe it will pass?

**RIMENSNYDER:** Well, as I say, the man we have to convince is President Bush. [chuckles] And that's why I did all the research on his grandfather, hoping that would convince him—that his grandfather has the right idea. [chuckles] So far it hasn't. His father, interestingly, was not as closed as he was on it. He didn't come out and support the idea of a vote, but he said it's, you know, if there's support for it and the case can be made, fine. Where his son takes the position that the founding fathers, that is George W. Bush takes the position, that the founding fathers never intended the citizens of the District of Columbia to be represented in Congress. And that's just not born out by any of the research I've done in the last 30 years,

or any of the research that's in this room, does not support that idea, that notion at all. It's just not supported on the record. It, he can say that's what he thinks the founding fathers were thinking. But, you know (chuckles) that's as far as he can go.

**KULYK:** Well aside from D.C. statehood, or at the very least, representation in Congress, what else would you like to see happen for the District of Columbia in the future?

**RIMENSNYDER:** Well, of course, we didn't talk about statehood directly, which was something I worked on the committee too. In fact I worked very closely with Jesse Jackson and his staff. Jackson came to the city and was elected as a, what we call a "Shadow Senator" in 1990 and began to then lobby Congress for statehood. Which of course if we became a state we'd have two senators and representative and a governor and a legislator like a state. So I did a lot of research on statehood. It was supported by the then-chairman of the Committee on the District of Columbia, Ronald Dellums of California. And a bill was brought forward and actually reported out of committee and brought to the floor in 1993, but only received I think about 160 votes. And only one Republican voted for it, Congressman [Wayne] Gilchrest of Maryland. So it didn't receive bipartisan support at all. It really went down, the major argument against it was that the financial, that that small of an area would not have the wherewithal to support itself as a state.

So as I say, we didn't get into the whole statehood issue. But that's way on the back burner if it's on the burner at all. For instance, the current delegate, Eleanor Holmes Norton, will not even introduce a statehood bill. She just doesn't think the city has the financial wherewithal to support statehood at the present time. And that's a disappointment to many people in this city who are statehood supporters. We did vote on statehood three times. Beginning in 1980, we voted an initiative to create a statehood constitutional convention, which wrote a constitution. That constitution was then approved, members were elected to that constitutional convention and then the constitution was written. And then the constitution, it was drafted, was sent back to the people and approved. So we've really had three votes on statehood and they were all overwhelmingly in favor of it.

So the sentiment in the city is, at least in the 1980s, was very strong for statehood. Whether it is as strong today, I'm not so sure. Especially when you have our leading elected official, Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, not supporting it, not even introducing a statehood bill. But I was kind of disappointed in Jesse Jackson that he didn't stay here and keep trying to keep it alive as an issue. At least I think we could have gotten some form of representation in Congress by now if he had. Because he had national stature and could have kept it alive as a national issue. Unfortunately, he didn't pursue it as much as a national issue when he was here. For instance, he didn't go on the national television shows and talk about it. For

example, he could have interviews. He would talk about other national issues and not the statehood, even though he was an elected statehood senator, whose, unpaid position but his responsibility is to advocate in Congress and elsewhere statehood for the District of Columbia. And I'm still in contact from time to time with Frank Watkins, who was his major staff person on this issue. He now works for his son, Jesse Jackson Jr., who is a representative from Chicago.

END OF TAPE 2/SIDE 1

TAPE 2/ SIDE 2

**KULYK:** This is Nathaniel Kulyk. I'm interviewing Nelson Rimensnyder for the Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project. It's still October 3rd. This is side two of tape two. And we are meeting at his house on Capitol Hill. If you would please continue.

**Rimensnyder:** Yes, I was talking about statehood and having worked with Jesse Jackson and Frank Watkins, his chief of staff, and who is now chief of staff to his son Jesse Jackson Jr., congressman from Chicago. And I see Frank Watkins occasionally and Jesse Jackson Jr., and I bring up the issue of statehood. I say "Well, when is Jesse going to introduce the statehood bill?" And of course they're not doing it because Eleanor Holmes Norton will not introduce a statehood bill.

Interestingly enough, I approached Dennis Kucinich when he was running for president in the primaries and he came to DC, whether he would introduce a statehood bill and he said he would. I actually think a statehood bill should be on the table to be introduced every year in Congress. Not that I think it's going to go anywhere immediately, but the people of the District of Columbia did vote on it for three times and I think it deserves to at least be on the table to discussion. And when these various proposals are brought up, like Congressman Davis's bill and retrocession is another thing that's brought up, like Dana Rohrabacher returning the district to Maryland where we would vote in their elections and proposals, along that line. So I do bring it up and I do, I bring it up with Eleanor Holmes Norton when I see her too. I think its incumbent upon her. That's what delegates are there for, to get the maximum political authority for their constituents and of course, that's, would be represented in a statehood. I kind of think that she's disrespecting the people, the voters of the District of Columbia, by not, in every Congress, introducing a statehood bill. Because they have voted firmly for it, 80%, I think 83% of those voting, approved it three different times. And so I think it should be, as I say, on the table. If I were the delegate from the District of Columbia, I would introduce it, but I'm not.

The, I was saying that the major argument that was made against statehood was the economic one and also interestingly, the security issue, which has come to the fore even more now since 9/11. But the

District of Columbia, Congress did want a separate seat of government for security reasons. And the ultimate control should be under Congress, and that of course goes back to the incident in 1783 when the Congress was meeting, of course it was the pre-constitutional Congress which we have today was meeting in Philadelphia and was surrounded by mutinous Revolutionary Army veterans demanding pay that that didn't receive for service during the Revolutionary War. Congress snuck out in the middle of the night and went up to Trenton and Princeton, and James Madison, was then the presiding officer of the Congress and he resolved that when they did get around to writing a permanent constitution that there would be a clause in there giving Congress the ultimate legislative authority in a separate seat of government. But Madison did not preclude, as I say, or any of the other founding fathers, that the citizens living in that seat of government would be permanently in any way denied representation in Congress and locally elected government and other political rights of citizens of the states.

And that, as I say, is one of my disappointments with President Bush. He insists that the founding fathers didn't intend the residents in the federal city, the seat of government, to have those political rights. There's just no evidence of that at all, that the founding fathers had that intention. If they had, they would have stated it. They would have written about it. And they didn't. In fact, many did mention that there should be political rights. Madison himself said, "Yes, they should have a locally elected government, no question about it." Alexander Hamilton said, "They should be represented in Congress, as soon as the district gets a population equivalent to that of a representative, it should be represented at least in the House initially and then ultimately in the Senate." Other representatives mentioned this, that it would be a great grievance if the people in the seat of government were not accorded representation in Congress and other local political rights of elected representative government.

So as I say, there was a Statehood Party functioning, I did work very closely too with, and became a very good friend of, numerous people in the Statehood Party and Charles Cassell, who ran various times, was an elected member of the school board and Hilda Mason, who was an elected member of the Statehood Party and sat on the City Council for many years. It's possible that a Statehood Party representative could still be elected to the City Council because that was one of the major Republican initiatives in the home rule bill that Charles Matthias and Gilbert Gude and other Republicans on the DC committee insisted, that there be minority party representation on the council, that the four elected "at-large" members on the city council, only two could be of the same party. So that has allowed for representation of Republicans and the Statehood Party and independents have also ran and been elected as "at-large" members. So it hasn't been a complete one-party monopoly in the local government. And that was tested in the courts, it was taken to court, whether that was constitutional, and the Supreme Court ruled that it was indeed, that

Congress had the ultimate authority in the city and could provide for a minority representation in the local government.

**KULYK:** Very quickly, are you satisfied overall with the work that you have done over the years?

**RIMENSNYDER:** Well, as I say, my major disappointment is not being able to get this collection as we've discussed briefly into the public debate here on some of these issues more and be accessible to scholars and members of Congress and staff who are continuing, and local government, who are continuing to pursue these issues. And as I say, it's important, as I say, to educate members of Congress. As I say, I've done some research on the Republican Party and how they've been involved historically in supporting the local voting rights here and trying to get the party back to that tradition of support, that I thought represented the best principles of the party, the Republican Party has always said that the representative government is very important. It's the basis of our whole system and of course the government closest to the people is the most important in many ways. So that, as I say, I'm going to continue to pursue these, see if I can develop some opportunities at least some parts of this collection, get into the, continuing debate on these issues that we've discussed today.

**KULYK:** Well, excellent. I think we're very good here. Thank you very much. I greatly appreciate it.

END OF TAPE 2/SIDE 2

END OF INTERVIEW