

THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK  
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

---

**Interviews with Mary Ellen Abrecht**

**Interview Dates:** February 27, 2018 and March 23, 2018

**Interviewer:** Jennifer Newton

**Transcribers:** Betsy Barnett and David MacKinnon



This interview transcript is the property of the Ruth Ann Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project.  
Not to be reproduced without permission.

START OF INTERVIEW

**NEWTON:** This is Jennifer Newton. I am interviewing Mary Ellen Abrecht, also known as M'El, M-apostrophe-E-l. I want to get that down right away [laughing], because the transcriber will never get it.

**ABRECHT:** Contraction of Mary Ellen.

**NEWTON:** That's right, Mary Ellen. For the Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project. It's the 27<sup>th</sup> of February, 2018. And we're meeting at my house at 700 East Capitol Street. Mary Ellen is a long time resident of the Hill but we're going to cover two topics. We're going to focus in on two topics in this interview. The first is her time as one of the first women on the Metropolitan Police force.

**ABRECHT:** No, the first woman was in 1917.

**NEWTON:** Okay. One of the first police patrolwomen. Can I say that?

**ABRECHT:** Not really.

**NEWTON:** All right. Well, we're going to get into that. And the second topic which we'll cover is the history of the house that Mary Ellen and her husband Gary [Abrecht] lived in for many years on the Hill, which has held at least four generations of her family. I counted them. So, anyway, we'll start with some basic ...

**ABRECHT:** I'll be right here.

**NEWTON:** ... some basic information. So, now, tell us where you were born.

**ABRECHT:** Okay. I was born in 1945 in Massachusetts.

**NEWTON:** Grew up there as well?

**ABRECHT:** Grew up there until I—well, I actually went to college there as well.

**NEWTON:** At?

**ABRECHT:** At Mt. Holyoke. Initially as a day student, because my mother had been Class of '28 there and knew that there was a tuition grant for townies. And moved to Washington in September of 1968, right after the wedding, where my husband was already teaching school.

**NEWTON:** Okay. So, you met Gary while you were in college?

**ABRECHT:** Yes.

**NEWTON:** So, you came straight from college to here?

**ABRECHT:** No, no. Went to graduate school in New York City. Gary was initially going to join me there but he couldn't get a job, so I decided to drop out and come to Washington. And our first apartment was in Anacostia.

**NEWTON:** And where was Gary working?

**ABRECHT:** He was an itinerant Latin teacher in half a dozen middle schools in Anacostia and commuted between them by motorcycle.

**NEWTON:** [Laughs] And when you came down, I mean, that was still an era when women, married women, didn't necessarily work. Did you totally intend to get a job right away?

**ABRECHT:** No. I intended to play housewife for a year. Two weeks into that Gary insisted I go get a job because I was driving him crazy.

**NEWTON:** [Laughing] A little bored with keeping house in an apartment, maybe.

**ABRECHT:** Right. [Both laugh]

**NEWTON:** So, what did you think of first?

**ABRECHT:** Well, in those days you looked at the want ads. I also got on the list to be a substitute teacher. I was walking distance from Beers Elementary School, which was one of the schools where Gary taught Latin.

**NEWTON:** And that's in Anacostia?

**ABRECHT:** Yes.

**NEWTON:** Still.

**ABRECHT:** Near Fairfax Village, right. Right on Pennsylvania Avenue. And I was accepted as a substitute teacher and I limited my availability to only the schools where Gary was already teaching and knew the principal. And so rather than getting on the citywide list, I got on a private list with each of those principals.

**NEWTON:** Which would get you more jobs or ...

**ABRECHT:** No, it would just get me convenient jobs.

**NEWTON:** Uh-huh.

**ABRECHT:** And I taught at Beers and I taught at Ketcham Annex.

**NEWTON:** And I haven't heard of either of those schools and it's possibly because I don't know Anacostia well.

**ABRECHT:** Anacostia, right. They're both elementary schools.

**NEWTON:** Are they still operating, do you know?

**ABRECHT:** Oh, yeah. In Ketcham Annex I did sort of kindergarten. At Beers I actually did sixth grade. And, again, through Gary's influence I got a call on a Friday evening from a teacher that he knew. She had to leave town suddenly for a funeral, couldn't be in the whole next week, and had left a classroom a complete mess and didn't want anybody to see it. So, she got me signed up and came over and gave me lesson plans and told me who was who in the class and set me up beautifully for a week of teaching her sixth grade class.

**NEWTON:** But this didn't obviously lead to a lifelong interest in teaching, the substituting.

**ABRECHT:** Well, I didn't think about it one way or another. I didn't have any education credits or, you know, a teaching degree and was still looking for a more permanent job when I stumbled into police work and never looked back.

**NEWTON:** And tell us how you stumbled into it. It seems like more of a calling, sort of like teaching.

**ABRECHT:** Oh, it was definitely not. It was very accidental. In those days, nothing I pursued through the want ads in the paper materialized. I was either underqualified or overqualified for anything that was available. And, of course, given the era, everybody wanted me to type and be a secretary. And I couldn't type very well and I certainly had no skills as a secretary.

**NEWTON:** And this is 196-?

**ABRECHT:** 8. [1968]

**NEWTON:** 8, okay. We should be specific here.

**ABRECHT:** So, I went to the U. S. Employment Service, which not only interviews you and recommended positions but also had a library room where they had loose leaf notebooks by type of work that included any want ads that they knew about. But they also included old want ads that you could follow. You could make a cold call, you know, from an old want ad to see if they were currently hiring.

And I with pen and paper took notes and wrote down telephone numbers. And the next day from home I telephoned a number of places in basically the social service loose leaf notebook. And one of the numbers I called had, since whatever ad I had gotten it from, been reassigned to police recruiting.

**NEWTON:** Oh, it wasn't police recruiting when you called it.

**ABRECHT:** No, no. Whatever notice I wrote it down from had not identified it as, you know, for police officers. I never did retrace my steps to find out what it was. The recruiter said that possibly there had been maybe a summer posting for recreational work through the police clubs or something. He didn't know. But, because several thousand additional police positions had been added as a result of everything else that had happened here in '68—the crime bills and the riots and everything—that they had added extra personnel and extra phone lines to police recruiting to try to fill these positions. And I got a recruiter who wouldn't let me hang up and insisted that being a policewoman as opposed to a police officer, patrol officer, was right up my alley, since I wanted social service work. And, in fact, you had to have a college degree or a nursing degree as a woman to become a policewoman.

**NEWTON:** At the same time that men didn't need a college degree.

**ABRECHT:** To be a patrol officer. Right. And women could not apply to be a patrol officer or a policeman. They were separate civil service categories. And, of course, coming out of college in the late 60s I was not only not looking for a career in law enforcement I wasn't even a big fan of police. I mean, they were the ones who were raiding college students for marijuana and, you know, various things. And I wasn't, having come from a small town, even after my stint in Manhattan, you know, I was not really aware of real crime.

**NEWTON:** Yeah. And generationally police were just viewed with suspicion, you know, in a way that was completely know-nothing ...

**ABRECHT:** Exactly.

**NEWTON:** ... but nonetheless part of the ethos.

**ABRECHT:** And in expressing those concerns the recruiter assured me that that was okay because policewomen didn't do real police work.

**NEWTON:** [Laughing] Sort of a red flag in front of the bull here.

**ABRECHT:** They worked with neglected and abused children and they did counsel delinquents and were sometimes called in to handle adult women who had been arrested but most of that was done by matrons.

He also explained that the department had recently reorganized. It had previously had a Women's Bureau where policewomen and matrons handled mainly adult women and some children and that now they had matrons to handle the adult women and that the Youth Division, which had both men and women in it, men only who had had several years of experience on patrol who then applied to become an investigator in the youth division. Women went there directly, with their advanced degree, of course. Anyway.

**NEWTON:** What's the difference—what's a matron? What was a matron?

**ABRECHT:** Basically just jail.

**NEWTON:** Ah, okay. For women.

**ABRECHT:** Searching and keeping charge of the cell blocks for women.

**NEWTON:** And, in fact, that sounded probably more interesting at that moment to you than the law enforcement aspect.

**ABRECHT:** Not the matron duty but the ...

**NEWTON:** No, the ...

**ABRECHT:** Oh, yeah.

**NEWTON:** The social work and the helping ...

**ABRECHT:** The social service work with the children. Yes, indeed. I am embarrassed to admit it now but the fact that women were on this pedestal and did something specialized was appealing to me and I wasn't yet offended by the fact that it ultimately was quite discriminatory.

**NEWTON:** I think it ...

**ABRECHT:** Because we started above the men even though it was also definitely a glass ceiling.

**NEWTON:** Well, I was going to say the idea that you had to be more qualified than the men just to get in the door probably hasn't yet gone away, but ...

**ABRECHT:** Right.

**NEWTON:** I think it is good to place this in the context for at least the people who are younger who might someday be listening to this is that it was just a different world.

**ABRECHT:** And it was entirely gender based, had nothing to do with your skill other than the degree, because I was a religion major at Mt. Holyoke College. I did a little babysitting and camp counseling but I really had no specialized training or particular interest in children.

**NEWTON:** But the fact that you were a woman ...

**ABRECHT:** Gary ...

**NEWTON:** ... just was the assumption ...

**ABRECHT:** Gary, who joined the police department six months later, had been a scout patrol leader, was the oldest in his family, had always taken care of younger children, had taught in middle school, by qualifications would have been the one to be hired as an investigator in the youth division and skip patrol. He had no choice. He had to be a uniformed patrol officer and wait a couple of years to even consider a position in the Youth Division. So, it was entirely gender based, had nothing to do with experience or skill.

**NEWTON:** Hmm. Probably not the last time either. So, it's 1968, the riots had happened.

**ABRECHT:** In the spring.

**NEWTON:** Were the police—was the police force looking to change itself in any way toward African-American officers or women officers at that point?

**ABRECHT:** Absolutely. I mean, police departments around the country, not so much because of the riots but because of the civil rights movement, were making an effort to get more African-Americans in their departments but they didn't have the vacancies to do so. And it was—you know, they'd have a couple of vacancies now and then and they'd have these exams and they could only hire the highest scoring and they didn't have the freedom to pick and choose. DC, with thousands of vacancies all at once ...

**NEWTON:** Because of the extra money given.

**ABRECHT:** ... because of the extra positions funded was able to hire let's say thousands. And, yes, they all had to pass an exam but it wasn't like you had to be the highest scoring out of—you know, there were so many positions available that if you could read and write and chew gum at the same time and pass the physical and, you know, were qualified ...

**NEWTON:** Yeah.

**ABRECHT:** ... you didn't have to be a top scorer and, so, they were able to branch out, hiring both women and African-Americans. And, so, yes, DC integrated much more quickly than many other departments. I mean there were already many African-Americans in the Department but my recruit class ... I don't know. I haven't looked at the [class] photo recently but I would say it was at least 50 percent African-American, if not more.

**NEWTON:** Out of how many in a class?

**ABRECHT:** Oh, I don't remember.

**NEWTON:** Like 50 or less than that?

**ABRECHT:** [Sighs] I would say probably 50 or 60, but—and there were classes going all the time. There were sections and, I mean, there were ... You were in training for two or three months, but there were a multiple—people were starting almost every week in another section.

**NEWTON:** Mm-hmm. So, they were expanding quickly.

**ABRECHT:** Oh, yeah. And ...

**NEWTON:** And given that women had such small roles to play in their conception of it at the time, did women come under this notion we want to get more people, different people in or was it more ...

**ABRECHT:** I have no idea. I had no, you know, I had really no insight into policy decisions at the time. I was just a raw recruit. And there were five or six women in my recruit class.

**NEWTON:** And nobody was saying, oh, this is so unusual or ...

**ABRECHT:** Oh, yeah. They were definitely saying it was unusual, but, also, because we weren't expected to do real police work, the sergeant instructors would ask us to skip self defense training to do secretarial work for them.

**NEWTON:** Mm-hmm.

**ABRECHT:** And many of them did. I didn't. I refused.

**NEWTON:** Oh, did you?

**ABRECHT:** Yes. I mean, again, I could type well enough to have typed my term papers in college, but I—my word in my entire job search in DC was “I cannot type”.

**NEWTON:** It's a defensive ...

**ABRECHT:** I denied it.

**NEWTON:** ... I remember very well.

**ABRECHT:** It was long before word processing, you know, when it became something you had to do.

**NEWTON:** And that everyone did.

**ABRECHT:** And everyone did. Yes.

**NEWTON:** It was—Yeah, yeah, I can see that that would be a ...

**ABRECHT:** I refused.

**NEWTON:** I think in many fields that was viewed as a dead end, that if you [started] that way they would never see you as anything other than a secretary.

**ABRECHT:** Exactly.

**NEWTON:** And I guess the police department needs secretaries, too.

**ABRECHT:** Yeah, yeah.

**NEWTON:** So, that was '68.

**ABRECHT:** That was '68.

**NEWTON:** And you came on to do the social service work. How long did you do that?

**ABRECHT:** Well, I think the first very “DC thing” we did while still in the academy is we were pulled out and sent to work Nixon’s inauguration.

**NEWTON:** Mmm.

**ABRECHT:** And the build-up to that was quite interesting, because, if you remember the police riot in Chicago for the Democratic convention the fall of '68—talk about change. Our instructors at the police academy showed us films of that and then said that that was totally wrong.

**NEWTON:** Mmm—don’t do this.

**ABRECHT:** That you will not behave that way. Yes, you will have a nightstick and you hold it for crowd control with both hands on either end and just use it to kind of keep the crowd away from you. If I see any of you with it raised up over your head, even if you don’t bring it down to hit anyone, you’re a probationer, you’re fired.

**NEWTON:** Wow! They really didn't want to repeat that ...

**ABRECHT:** They absolutely—so, the kind of prep for going out on the street with the inauguration was absolutely we are not going to do what Chicago did. This is how you handle protestors who are exercising their First Amendment rights. [Dog begins to bark and continues] Yes, we'll arrest them if they become violent, but, you know, it's not ...

**NEWTON:** And it was the time when there was a lot of unrest and rioting.

**ABRECHT:** Sure. And I, in fact, actually did not do crowd control. I was assigned to a detective in the Youth Division to cruise around and be available if any juvenile was arrested.

**NEWTON:** Ahh.

**ABRECHT:** And, indeed, we did process one juvenile who was arrested for flag burning, which, at the time, was illegal. That was before the Supreme Court declared that.

**NEWTON:** And a big issue.

**ABRECHT:** Yeah.

**NEWTON:** Yeah.

**ABRECHT:** And, you know, we had to call his parents and all of that but, it was, you know ...

**NEWTON:** It was a polarized time in a way that people are familiar with now, I think, where people just ...

**ABRECHT:** Mm-hmm.

**NEWTON:** They were—On flag burning right, as you mentioned it, was such a huge issue.

**ABRECHT:** Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

**NEWTON:** You know, the kids that did it were considered these awful ...

**ABRECHT:** Yeah.

**NEWTON:** ... you know, unpatriotic, etc. Because people had never seen it before as much.

**ABRECHT:** Right, mm-hmm.

**NEWTON:** It actually sounds rather enlightened of the police department ...

**ABRECHT:** Oh, yeah.

**NEWTON:** ... because certainly many police departments around the country at that point were very much holding a different cultural value it seems.

**ABRECHT:** Yeah, yeah. Well, there had been, you know, a lot of not congressional oversight but a lot of, you know, rapid call for change around the country and it was just more possible in DC.

**NEWTON:** I just remembered, was that before Home Rule?

**ABRECHT:** Yes.

**NEWTON:** Yes, so ...

**ABRECHT:** We had a Public Safety Director—it was Patrick Murphy at the time—who was even above the Police Chief.

**NEWTON:** And he was hired by—because it would have been a congressional oversight ...

**ABRECHT:** Yeah. I don't remember the mechanics of it.

**NEWTON:** I can't remember how that went. But, yes, it wasn't a typical big city ...

**ABRECHT:** Right.

**NEWTON:** ... police department in many ways, I guess. So, did you deal with prostitution in your role then or was it only later with the patrol?

**ABRECHT:** During my initial interviews not a hundred percent of the women went to the Youth Division. Some went undercover in narcotics, some went undercover not so much for ordinary prostitution but for various other vice enforcement. I mean, one of the questions I was asked was would I be comfortable, you know, going into, you know, a lesbian bar essentially to make arrests.

**NEWTON:** Mmm.

**ABRECHT:** And, you know, again, I went to the Youth Division. I didn't have to deal with any of that, but I did not for my first couple of years in the department I had almost no contact with prostitutes unless they were juvenile.

**NEWTON:** Which I guess there were some.

**ABRECHT:** And some of them—there were definitely runaways and what have you. But, the adult women were processed differently and, you know, I'd occasionally get called to a precinct to do a search but that would be it.

**NEWTON:** It struck me—I should say that I have read your book, which is called *The Making of a Woman Cop* that Mary Ellen wrote in—after she had left the police force. [M'El's book, published in 1976, is currently out of print but used copies can occasionally be found online.]

**ABRECHT:** No. It was published as I left ...

**NEWTON:** Published? Okay.

**ABRECHT:** ... but it was being written in my last few years in the department.

**NEWTON:** Oh, was it? Oh, okay. So, it was right at the moment. And, so, some of this comes from there. But I was struck with the sort of choice that to do actual police work at the moment you came in it was only the women who were willing to masquerade as prostitutes ...

**ABRECHT:** Right.

**NEWTON:** ... that seemed to be out there in the action.

**ABRECHT:** Well, not really. It was undercover narcotics work was probably more common.

**NEWTON:** But, they could make arrests and stuff, right?

**ABRECHT:** Well, yes, I mean, so could the Youth Division women. My first arrest was of a man for beating his baby.

**NEWTON:** Ahh.

**ABRECHT:** Which interestingly, I mean, I think I mentioned that arrest in the book but talk about things coming full cycle. At the time I joined the police department and was in the Youth Division there was a Junior Village that was essentially a group home for neglected or abused children that was more institutional than foster care. [Noise of clock] And the first arrest I made was for child abuse, but both the mother and the father had been themselves abused and neglected and had grown up in Junior Village and had met there. So, they had zero parenting skills. He was arrested and initially released but then detained and ultimately went to jail because after the mother of the baby testified against him at trial he beat her up.

**NEWTON:** Oh, gosh.

**ABRECHT:** Twenty some years later, he appeared before me when I was a judge in Superior Court [of the District of Columbia]. He had an unusual last name.

**NEWTON:** So, you could remember him.

**ABRECHT:** And I at the time had always checked my lockup list before I took the bench. Not so much for the names of the defendants but to see who the arresting officer was, because I had to recuse if they worked for my husband. But this name—it was Godbolt, G-O-D-B-O-L-T—was unusual enough that when I spotted it I did a little research and sure enough it was the guy I had arrested 20 years earlier. The baby that we had saved from him was then incarcerated in Lorton on drug charges. I had him approach the bench and I said, you know, for today when we're just determining your release, I'll, you know, handle the case, but if you choose to go to trial, I'll have to assign it to somebody else. I feel I have to recuse. Do you remember being arrested by a policewoman in 1969? His eyes lit up and he said, "Yes." And I said, "It was me." And, of course, everybody was astonished. But the saddest thing about his reaction is he was so pleased to be somebody who was recognized.

**NEWTON:** Oh.

**ABRECHT:** He had no shame or embarrassment. It was, I'm somebody. This judge knows who I am. It was just very sad.

**NEWTON:** Oh, gosh. And to see him come back 20 ...

**ABRECHT:** Oh, his charge was assaulting a woman.

**NEWTON:** Aah. So, I guess it's never only once, probably.

**ABRECHT:** Never. And as I say, he grew up and he was abused and neglected himself. I mean, it's a ... The sad thing about being a police officer and not a social worker but also the only thing that made me go through it is it wasn't my responsibility to cure these ills. And I think if I were a real social worker it would have been much harder to deal with these issues. As a police officer, you know, I got a limited role; as a prosecutor, had a limited role; as a judge, I had a limited role and I could do my job without feeling personally responsible for the trends and the overall ...

**NEWTON:** It's hard enough, though, to see it go by you, I think.

**ABRECHT:** Yes, but ... You know. I have utmost respect for social workers and their effort to actually make change.

**NEWTON:** Because it's hard, change. Yeah.

**ABRECHT:** Very, yeah.

**NEWTON:** Well, from the sublime to the ridiculous here. I loved the saga of the uniforms, the policewoman's uniform. Can you describe the uniform that you wore when you first went on ...

**ABRECHT:** Well, actually, I'd like ... Before we get there, let's deal with 1969.

**NEWTON:** All right.

**ABRECHT:** I get out to the Youth Division, say I'm on the police department, and at that point ... Well, surprisingly, my parents were actually more pleased that I was a police officer than that I was a social worker because they thought it was safer.

**NEWTON:** Oh, that's interesting.

**ABRECHT:** Being armed with a radio and being with backup. And, you know, I had more support going into dangerous neighborhoods and tenements than a social worker. Anyway. [Interviewer laughs] But, as a result, family at several levels—I mean, I had this great-aunt living on Capitol Hill, living alone with just a companion aide.

**NEWTON:** An elderly great-aunt I take it.

**ABRECHT:** Oh, yeah. And they kept wanting me to go visit her and also they wanted, since she had lived in Northeast during the riots, they also wanted police to check on her, you know. And, so, we put it off and put it off. I had no particular interest. Finally, it was a direct order. She turns 86 on February 28, 1969. You will go visit your great-aunt Marg and bring her flowers. So on February 28, 1969, Gary and I came to Capitol Hill, rang the doorbell ...

**NEWTON:** At? Give us the address.

**ABRECHT:** 9 Eighth Street NE.

**NEWTON:** And we should say that the '68 riots came within a block or two, right, of that house.

**ABRECHT:** Of course. She, we learned, had had a heart attack right after the riots and had gone to, what was it, Casualty or Rogers Memorial? The Capitol Hill hospital up here.

**NEWTON:** Uh-huh. At Seventh and Mass[achusetts Avenue]?

**ABRECHT:** Which was in such terrible shape at the time. I think she said there were rodents in her room. Anyway, she got out of there as fast as she could. But she was now pretty well housebound because

of the heart problems. So, we were ordered to go visit her. Well, she met us at the door, took one look at the flowers, put them aside and said, “Don’t make this place look like a funeral home. Come on in.” [Interviewer laughs] And she was listening to the police band of a radio. She had gotten that set up after the riots so she could hear what was happening in the block at least.

**NEWTON:** Yeah.

**ABRECHT:** And we had a great time with her. She was a spunky woman, great conversationalist, obviously had lots of stories about the Hill and the family and after meeting her that first afternoon we visited her by choice frequently. But, she was fascinated with my being in police work and ...

**NEWTON:** Oh, sure. She’s hearing it on the CB [Citizens’ Band radio] and then ...

**ABRECHT:** Yeah. And she also felt bad that she had not yet sent us a wedding present. We had been married in September of ’68 and good old, you know, hot summers in DC, she discovered we didn’t have any iced tea spoons in our ....

**NEWTON:** For your entertainment? [Laughs]

**ABRECHT:** Or even for ourselves, in our stainless pattern. And, so, after conferring that that would be a good addition she had someone take her down to Woodward & Lothrop to buy us iced tea spoons. Which are particularly amusing because after her death and when we took over her house fully furnished, we found cuffs for iced tea glasses.

**NEWTON:** Oh, like the knit ones.

**ABRECHT:** Crocheted. Yeah, that her husband had crocheted. And we still have them and that was ... Anyway, it was delightful.

**NEWTON:** I remember those.

**ABRECHT:** Yes.

**NEWTON:** The idea was it was an early insulator, right?

**ABRECHT:** Right.

**NEWTON:** Ha.

**ABRECHT:** She was alone at the time. Her older sister had died fairly young. Her husband, that she had actually married as his second wife upon his retirement from the Marine Band, he had lived on East

Capitol Street and he moved in with her at 9 Eighth Street. They traveled and he had some other work for a few years. But it was a short marriage because he was quite a bit older than she. I mean, she was older when she married him to start with.

**NEWTON:** But she was in her late 30s, right?

**ABRECHT:** Probably.

**NEWTON:** Or 40 something?

**ABRECHT:** Or even in her 40s. But he was ...

**NEWTON:** Sixty something.

**ABRECHT:** ... much older. He had retired. But having been a musician—anyway, he took up crocheting.

**NEWTON:** [Laughing] Well, it's a teaser for our discussion of the house, that that house had been in her family since it was built.

**ABRECHT:** But, let me tell you her name.

**NEWTON:** Oh, yes.

**ABRECHT:** Margaret Van der Zee Whelpley Smith.

**NEWTON:** [Laughs] Smith being her husband's ...

**ABRECHT:** Uh-huh. The husband that she married, Walter Smith, was a Smith. So, she was Mrs. Smith, but ...

**NEWTON:** But more of a Whelpley.

**ABRECHT:** Margaret Van der Zee Whelpley.

**NEWTON:** Yeah, yeah.

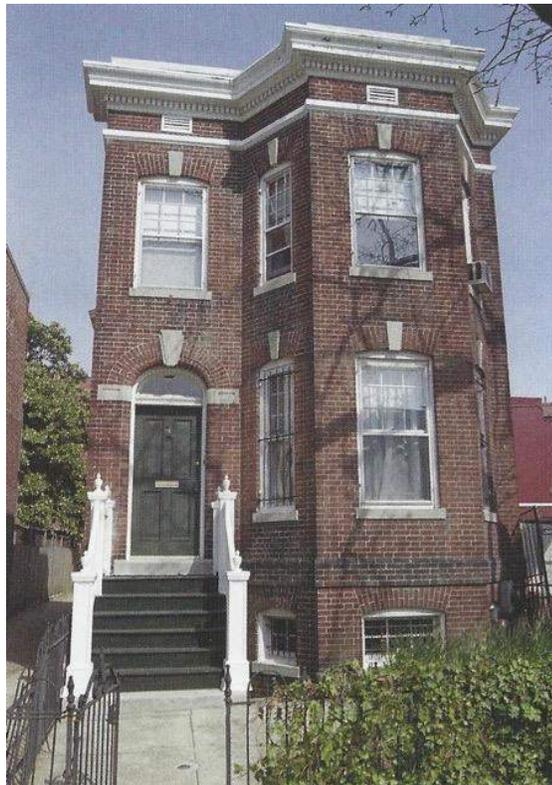
**ABRECHT:** Yeah. Whelpley was my great-grandfather's name. Anyway.

**NEWTON:** Well, we'll go back to that.

**ABRECHT:** That was February of 1969 and we continued to meet her. And then that summer Gary joined the police department as well.

**NEWTON:** Because you were having such a good time?

**ABRECHT:** Yes. He thought I was having much more fun than he was teaching Latin. And her health declined and she reached the point where she was first hospitalized for another heart attack and everybody except her knew that she'd never be able to return home to live alone. She wasn't literally living alone. She had a woman companion living with her who worked days up at the farmers' market in Northeast. And, anyway, the family didn't want to leave the house vacant. She was not willing to admit that she wouldn't return, so they couldn't sell it yet. And because Gary and I were both on the police department, the aunt who was her responsible person asked us to come and live at 9 Eighth Street NE, which was still fully furnished and occupied with her nightgowns on the bedroom door for whatever rent we were paying for an apartment in Anacostia, just to keep the house safe.



9 Eighth Street NE, Washington, DC

**NEWTON:** Oh, I didn't know this part.

**ABRECHT:** Because we were police officers. And so we did that. But, when we came to the vacant house a couple of times before we actually moved in, we were inside and there was this loud bang on the door and it was essentially the block's mayor. Joe, Joe—what was his? I want to say Smith. No, it wasn't Smith. Joe somebody or other who lived directly across the street, came over.

**NEWTON:** Had seen you go in?

**ABRECHT:** Yeah. He used to sit on his porch and keep ... And demanded to know who we were and what right we had to be in Mrs. Smith's house.

**NEWTON:** He hadn't seen you visiting before obviously.

**ABRECHT:** No.

**NEWTON:** You weren't in uniform.

**ABRECHT:** No, no. And I started by thanking him for his interest and then explained who I was and I looked enough like a first cousin of mine who'd grown up in Virginia and been at my great-aunt's frequently that he credited the story.

**NEWTON:** [Laughs] Otherwise he was going to ask for a direct birth certificate or something.

**ABRECHT:** Exactly. But, it was great to have such an observant neighbor. Anyway. So, that gets us—'69 Gary's joined the police department. We actually moved into 9 Eighth Street in probably at least by January of '70.

**NEWTON:** But that was a temporary, probably, a temporary measure.

**ABRECHT:** Oh, yes. We were just renting it. And we ultimately bought the house from the aunt who inherited it. Later, my aunt died. Later, I think in May of 1970. But that first summer at 9 Eighth Street was quite ... We were glad to be police officers. I mean, there were emergency police runs to that block almost nightly. There were alcoholics sort of living in the stairwell of one of the apartment buildings in the block ...

**NEWTON:** Were some of the ...

**ABRECHT:** ... building fires.

**NEWTON:** ... buildings vacant? Or were they just ...

**ABRECHT:** No.

**NEWTON:** Okay, it was just people living there.

**ABRECHT:** And hanging out and setting fires and what have you. The block was fairly balanced integration-wise with very solid African American families in several of the houses. Needless to say, like, the grandson was ne'er do well and, you know, into crime, but, you know, the solid citizen type. But the

real troublemakers were a white family in one of the apartment buildings with children ranging from like age four to teenage daughters. And they used to hang out in front of number 9 Eighth Street because the mother didn't like them hanging out in front of the apartment building. And that four year old cursed worse than anybody I'd ever heard. You know, motherfucker this and that. And guys would come by to visit the daughters and honk and carry on. Anyway, eventually they moved off the block to Maryland because they thought the neighborhood was a bad influence on them.

**NEWTON:** Mmm. [Laughs]

**ABRECHT:** But it was quite a busy—that first couple of summers were quite busy.

**NEWTON:** Was it the wider area or just the particular combination of people on that block?

**ABRECHT:** Oh, no, no, no. I think it was the whole Capitol Hill area.

**NEWTON:** I'm trying to think of where the ...

**ABRECHT:** The guidebooks at that point said if you're visiting Capitol Hill do not venture east of Seventh Street.

**NEWTON:** So, Seventh Street was the line.

**ABRECHT:** It was the line.

**NEWTON:** And it went down pretty fast, obviously, since we're talking about Eighth Street NE ...

**ABRECHT:** Exactly.

**NEWTON:** The unit block of Eighth Street, yeah.

**ABRECHT:** Yeah.

**NEWTON:** Mmm, mmm. Were DC police officers required to live in the District at that point?

**ABRECHT:** No, they were not. There may have been a mileage ... You couldn't live more than, I don't remember, maybe it was—I mean we were so close we didn't focus—maybe 25 miles or something. You had to be close enough that you could be called in an emergency and not take forever.

**NEWTON:** Okay.

**ABRECHT:** But you didn't have to live within the city. And, actually, at one point, there were like half a dozen police officers living in our block.

**NEWTON:** Oh, really.

**ABRECHT:** A couple of other policewomen had one of the small row houses several doors down. The house across the alley from us was kind of a classic of the time group home and one of the women of that group was in Metropolitan Police Department and we often walked in to police headquarters together. And, interestingly, she didn't go to youth services, she went to the check and fraud unit as an investigator. And, then, from there was one of the first women in the Secret Service.

**NEWTON:** Oh, really.

**ABRECHT:** Which, of course, do forgeries and stuff.

**NEWTON:** Oh, I hadn't thought about that, yeah.

**ABRECHT:** Yeah. And, then, the corner house, 800 [800 East Capitol Street], was throughout that time a—it was owned by Mr. Pierce. He and his wife fancied themselves as great historians but, boy, did they have a dive there. But, at least three bachelor male police officers of our acquaintance lived in various apartments there. It was broken up into many, many ...

**NEWTON:** It was a rooming house more ...

**ABRECHT:** No, it was apartments. But, you know, every closet became a kitchen. It was terrible. You know, again, they'd find rodents in their shower, you know. It was terrible.

**NEWTON:** Now, was this just accident that so many police or was it ...

**ABRECHT:** I think all the women it was accident. All three of the men were people who knew us before they moved in. And, so, it was because of us that they found their apartment there.

**NEWTON:** I guess it would be relatively inexpensive compared to farther in on the Hill.

**ABRECHT:** Yes.

**NEWTON:** So, that might help, too.

**ABRECHT:** In '69, at the time, someone I met at the police academy who also lived on the Hill on Sixth Street was Don Graham of *Washington Post*.

**NEWTON:** And I didn't realize until talking to you that he was a police officer.

**ABRECHT:** He was a police officer for several years and he not only lived on the Hill, he was at the academy at the same time. In fact, he talked to Gary before Gary joined and his assignment was Number

9 Precinct, which includes our block, not his. Not where he lived but it include[d] near Northeast, now part of the Fifth District. But Old Number 9 Precinct. I think it, I don't know, I think it now is an apartment building or a restaurant or something. But, I think it says "precinct" or something. Anyway, it's kept its identity though it's long since not been a police office.

**NEWTON:** Oh, the ...

**ABRECHT:** The Number 9 Precinct building.

**NEWTON:** Headquarters.

**ABRECHT:** Yeah.

**NEWTON:** Oh, ha. Which is out ...

**ABRECHT:** Further north.

**NEWTON:** Further north and east?

**ABRECHT:** I want to say on Ninth Street. Anyway, a friend of Don Graham's who came to the police department because of Don Graham, but who lived at 800 East Capitol briefly and is now a lawyer in Boston, visited not long ago and we took him by old Number 9 Precinct so he could see what became of it. [Interviewer laughs] He had been assigned a foot beat in the Northeast Market, protecting watermelons and the like. [Interviewer laughs]

**NEWTON:** Don Graham didn't spend a career on the force though, right?

**ABRECHT:** Oh, no.

**NEWTON:** It was just a few years.

**ABRECHT:** It was just a few years. He wanted to get to know the city. He'd also been in Viet Nam. He just knew he had a lot of privilege and did not want to learn even the newspaper business from the top.

**NEWTON:** Ah. So, he was always intending to go into that, but just ...

**ABRECHT:** Oh, yes.

**NEWTON:** I see.

**ABRECHT:** But, he wanted to learn the city.

**NEWTON:** That's not an easy way to learn it. And then you've got to ...

**ABRECHT:** Yeah. And he was a police officer for a couple of years. And even when he went to the Post, he started out in the pressroom. I mean he did grunt work there for a while, too. He was very good about trying to understand all levels of life in the city before he ...

**NEWTON:** Including in his own organization.

**ABRECHT:** Absolutely, yeah.

**NEWTON:** Well, let's get to the patrol issue.

**ABRECHT:** Okay.

**NEWTON:** I was sort of segueing into that with the uniforms ...

**ABRECHT:** Right, exactly.

**NEWTON:** ... because I think that says something about the move. We could start with the uniforms if you like.

**ABRECHT:** How we got there first. Jerry Wilson was the Chief.

**NEWTON:** Of the entire metropolitan force?

**ABRECHT:** Of the police department, yes.

**NEWTON:** Mm-hmm.

**ABRECHT:** While I was still in the Youth Division my first stint, I met somebody at a party who knew somebody who was working for the Police Foundation, which was a think tank. Actually Pat Murphy, who had been head of Public ...

**NEWTON:** Public Safety I think you said.

**ABRECHT:** Public Safety, was now in charge of, and the woman I was ultimately introduced to had actually gone to Mt. Holyoke College and was a senior when I was there as a freshman. And Catherine Milton was her name. And she was starting at the Police Foundation to do a study of women in law enforcement and their underutilization obviously. And she went to Jerry Wilson and asked to borrow me for a few months to travel the country and do the ground research about how women were used or ill used in departments around the country.

**NEWTON:** So, you had a very interesting view of other departments ...

**ABRECHT:** Yes.

**NEWTON:** ... that most people don't get.

**ABRECHT:** So, for several months, she and I traveled separately—I mean, we'd do separate cities but we covered the country by each doing it. I went to New York City, I went to Dallas, I went to Philadelphia. It was a very interesting time in Philadelphia. I was banned from the city thereafter. I've forgotten all the places, but, anyway, ultimately we published a book on all these city reports and—many departments were experimenting with new roles but nobody was totally integrating women. You know, some were on patrol but only with a woman partner, others were not on patrol and were segregated into a women's bureau or youth division.

**NEWTON:** Not unlike DC.

**ABRECHT:** Yes. Some were secretaries, some, you know, there was a wide range of use but we put it all together and the police foundation then contacted again Chief Wilson, who was a great guy. And he had a working mother. He was somewhat personally offended by the fact that women had this privileged position and he couldn't use them randomly. And, you know, was personally in favor and had no qualms about women and men doing the same work and, if they're going to get the same pay, they ought to be able to do the same work.

**NEWTON:** Can you explain the privileged position because I think that's something that younger people wouldn't understand.

**ABRECHT:** Well, as I say, as a woman I was hired on as a policewoman and assigned as an investigator in the Youth Division to work on basically a specialization. Men were hired, regardless of their education, to go, to start walking a beat or in a patrol car, in uniform, rain or shine, and would have to apply after several years' experience when there was a vacancy in the Division to be able to do that.

**NEWTON:** So, there's the glass ceiling on top of you but you're also jumped up above to begin.

**ABRECHT:** Right.

**NEWTON:** Which is I think something that's very hard, that it didn't always look like you were being discriminated against.

**ABRECHT:** And didn't wear uniforms because, like, detectives did not wear uniforms. I mean, you know, being able to wear business attire ...

**NEWTON:** Was a higher thing, right.

**ABRECHT:** It was a benefit. Yeah, it was a higher thing. Anyway, so, the Police Foundation, my now friend Catherine Milton, approached Jerry Wilson about why don't you make DC a model and get some women on uniform patrol and let us study it and keep track of it and see if it's workable.

**NEWTON:** Had you found that anywhere else, in any other city?

**ABRECHT:** I think Dallas had women patrolling in uniform, two women partners. There were several cities where things were going on but it was not widespread and it was not if you were hired as a police officer you did the same job as a man from the start. It was, you know, there were special, you know, deals.

**NEWTON:** And she thought this might work here because she knew the Chief and thought that he might ...

**ABRECHT:** I don't know what her motivation was. And, also, the foundation was here in DC and having a ...

**NEWTON:** Aah. So, it was easier to study.

**ABRECHT:** And he was all for it. But the uniform thing was so funny. And talk about the privilege. He first asked the policewomen to come up with a uniform. And these women who liked being investigators came up with things like airline stewardess uniforms. I mean we were only a few years from wearing hats and gloves with our dresses. But they were all stylish dresses. And, of course, policewomen at the time are carrying their revolvers in their pocketbooks, their purses.

**NEWTON:** [Laughing] So easy to get out in an emergency.

**ABRECHT:** I actually—another fun Capitol Hill story is—they are hard to get out. So I went to a leather person [vendor] at the Eastern Market one Saturday and looked at his purses and I said, I picked up one of the purses and I said, "Do you think you could sew a holster inside this purse?" [Interviewer laughs] He didn't bat an eye and he did it.

**NEWTON:** Oh, wow.

**ABRECHT:** And, so, I bought a leather purse at Eastern Market with a holster against one of the sides so that it could be gotten immediately and it wasn't mixed up with the compact or the comb or the brush, you know. [Interviewer laughs] But, yes, it was ridiculous. The other thing is policewomen also as detectives were not given the revolver with the four inch barrel but with a snub nose because it fit better in the purse. It's also less accurate.

**NEWTON:** Mmm. On the theory, I guess, that you ... Well, I don't know whether it fit better in the purse or because you wouldn't need it in the course of duty. I don't know.

**ABRECHT:** But the other interesting thing is although I was using the less accurate snub nose in police training, I did better in my firearms training than many of my male colleagues who had come from Viet Nam and thought they knew everything there was to learn about weapons.

**NEWTON:** Had you ever shot a gun before?

**ABRECHT:** I had shot a rifle. My father did some hunting and I had shot a rifle. Well, I think. At least had held a rifle. I don't think my father ever owned a revolver. But, because I had never fired a revolver, never even held one, I listened to the instructor very carefully and followed the rules. The guys who thought they knew, didn't, and so I ended up being more accurate and doing better. So, that was just an amusing—beginners sometimes do better than people who think they know what they're doing.

**NEWTON:** Right. And I imagine most of the men, whether they were veterans or not, had handled guns before ...

**ABRECHT:** Oh, not necessarily.

**NEWTON:** ... you know, in some fashion.

**ABRECHT:** So, anyway, the women were asked to come up with a uniform, came up with something that Jerry Wilson thought was ridiculous and certainly not appropriate for patrol work. Of course, the women who were designing it had no interest in ever going on patrol.

**NEWTON:** And certainly hadn't been hired for patrol work.

**ABRECHT:** And there was a lot of tension. I was moved from the Youth Division to work closer to the Chief as—they gave me the title Policewoman Coordinator. And I worked directly for a civilian who was also an unusual hire, because usually that was a police official who was head of personnel and human resources and what have you. And was sort of put in charge of the nitty-gritty of getting women on patrol. Anyway, the uniform thing was a major hassle. Once it was taken away from those who wanted a ...

**NEWTON:** Fashion statement.

**ABRECHT:** ... stewardess uniform, a—was it the property committee? I don't know, some group of men said, you know, to heck with this and sort of bought off the shelf uniforms that I think were Navy or Air Force, I've forgotten which. But, anyway, military uniforms. Skirts, pumps, you know, classic

uniform shirt that looked like the men's, you know, pockets and what have you. And slacks that had no pockets in them. Again, the gun was to be in the purse.

**NEWTON:** So, there was a purse that went with this outfit.

**ABRECHT:** I can't remember whether it was a uniform purse or we just were supposed to have a black purse. I guess it was a uniform purse, I think, yeah. But, in any event—and then they experimented with a Sam Browne belt going over this whole thing, which, you know, had a shoulder strap so you didn't need belt—oh, the pants had no belt loops either.



Mary Ellen Abrecht, circa 1972, using a police call box and wearing an early policewoman's uniform based on Navy women's apparel.

**NEWTON:** So, a Sam Browne belt is one that is not just around the waist. It's the—one shoulder ...

**ABRECHT:** It has a strap over the shoulder so you can wear it on top.

**NEWTON:** Crosswise.

**ABRECHT:** Right. But, gradually, we, I mean, some of us added our own pockets to the first issue.

**NEWTON:** You were lucky you could sew.

**ABRECHT:** Yes, exactly. And eventually the uniforms were modified. But, it was an amusing time. And the inquiries from the manufacturers as to why these slacks had no pockets, it was because women didn't

like pockets over their hips, that it wasn't slimming. You know, practicality or fashion and, of course, military women were not going to battle in these uniforms. They were, you know, sitting in an office or something.

**NEWTON:** It was a dress uniform.

**ABRECHT:** Yeah. It was, you know, anyway, it was just an amusing time with a lot of rough starts.

**NEWTON:** And even the question of slacks versus skirts had ...

**ABRECHT:** Yeah.

**NEWTON:** ... connotations of, you know, sexuality and whatever.

**ABRECHT:** Right, right.

**NEWTON:** Were you lesbians that you wanted pants kind of thing.

**ABRECHT:** And you certainly couldn't run in your pumps. And with the slacks at least you could wear, you know, Dr. Scholl's black oxfords. [Both laugh]

**NEWTON:** And move fast.

**ABRECHT:** Yes.

**NEWTON:** Yes.

**ABRECHT:** And they were never provided. You bought your own, as the men did. The pumps actually were provided.

**NEWTON:** Oh.

**ABRECHT:** So they were all the same.

**NEWTON:** Gosh. I hadn't realized that uniforms, of course, would be provided rather than you being able to go out and have somebody put a holster in our purse or whatever, but, yes.

**ABRECHT:** Yes.

**NEWTON:** I loved there was a statement in your book about how one of your most agreeable domestic chores you could ever remember was sewing on your sergeant stripes at some point.

**ABRECHT:** Oh.

**NEWTON:** And I think that's lovely because it captures something that I really liked in the book as you get onto patrol and you're trying to figure out how to do this. In so many ways it requires so many different sorts of skills and it's very difficult for you in the book to tell what is male sabotage, disinterest versus this is hard work. This is difficult, dangerous work and requires multi-tasking skills and other quick thinking skills that are just difficult and many ways to second guess.

**ABRECHT:** Pumping gas was another example of that. I don't remember, do you remember what year everybody pumping their own gas started? It certainly hadn't started in my early days in the police department and I ...

**NEWTON:** Back in the day, for those younger people, the gas station had sent someone out to pump your gas for you.

**ABRECHT:** And I had not pumped my own gas.

**NEWTON:** Yes, women wouldn't do it even it was self- ...

**ABRECHT:** Yes, but, at the police stations there were gas pumps and you were expected to gas up your own police cruiser. And early on, you know, I'm at the gas pump and I need to do it and I really sort of need a little assistance. And I'm the sergeant now, so, you know, it was very [difficult to ask for help]. And the man I approached to help was a new guy in my squad who was, I think he was from Thailand. Anyway, he was Asian, had some more education than many of the others but he just had been a little more accepting and he just seemed more approachable as a human being than many of the macho others in our ... And I went to him for assistance and he laughed. And he says, "I don't know how to do it either." [Both laugh] And we muddled through. We both, with a good laugh, figured it out and—I mean, he'd always had his partner gas their car. I mean it just, you know.

**NEWTON:** That's one strategy, right?

**ABRECHT:** But I didn't have a partner. You know, sergeants rode alone most of the time. Anyway, so.

**NEWTON:** And your book is full of moments like that where you're wondering if somebody is undercutting you and then you realize as you're thinking about it that you didn't know how to do this and you've quickly remedied that.

**ABRECHT:** Mm-hmm.

**NEWTON:** But I think it says something about the time period that it was hard to know there was active, open undercutting ...

**ABRECHT:** Mm-hmm.

**NEWTON:** ... in many ways. And there's also just a lot of people trying to figure out a tough job.

**ABRECHT:** And, boy, did it help to have not only a husband but a husband who was also a police officer, because if I could anticipate something in advance something I would need to do, I would get him to teach me how to ... For example, one thing we were always doing for each other and even for citizens was jump starting a car.

**NEWTON:** That's exactly what I was going to say because I remember that in the book.

**ABRECHT:** And I had him teach me how to jump start a car so that I could without hesitation do that.

**NEWTON:** Right, because it had been expected that you would do that for, as you say, for your own car.

**ABRECHT:** A citizen, yeah.

**NEWTON:** It's something that I'd never thought of before is how police cars are driven all day long in the city with the lights on, the air conditioning on, and the batteries die all the time.

**ABRECHT:** Mm-hmm.

**NEWTON:** And I'm sure that is still true.

**ABRECHT:** Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

**NEWTON:** It's the use of the car that is so difficult. Let's talk about ... Oo, do you know what time it is?

**ABRECHT:** I've got five minutes.

**NEWTON:** I did want to ... Let's see, let me ask, so much has changed in policing since your book. And it would be difficult ...

**ABRECHT:** Absolutely, yeah, yeah.

**NEWTON:** Something that struck me that probably hasn't changed and that may be even worse is the description of the New Year's party you gave in 1972 where you had both police colleagues, you and Gary ...

**ABRECHT:** Neighborhood, church.

**NEWTON:** And liberal neighbors and how it was such a different world. And I didn't—that was a particularly striking moment. And I wonder if you could describe it a little bit, but also wonder if it's still that big a divide.

**ABRECHT:** I have no idea whether it's that big a divide between police and non-police because there are many more—I think police departments generally have many more college graduates than they did back in the day. I see that a Capitol Hill [resident], the Rimensnyder son, who was a West Point graduate, is now a DC police officer, you know. Anyway. But, certainly, our political divide, you know, it would be like throwing a party and discovering that you have some Trump supporters and some anti-Trump people in the same room. But, also, I think one of the differences that probably still would come out is—I mean, there's a reason why Don Graham joined the police department to get to know the city. A lot of people who have never done anything like police work have assumptions or views about the underbelly of the city that are wrong. And for a police officer who not only does know the city but knows he knows the city, you know, would find someone who's approaching issues only on a theoretical level quite annoying. And vice versa.

**NEWTON:** Yeah.

**ABRECHT:** I think that would always be true.

**NEWTON:** Yes, I'm sure it would be actually. It just looks so pie-in-the-sky ...

**ABRECHT:** Yeah, mm-hmm.

**NEWTON:** ... for the liberal person whatever their conclusion ...

**ABRECHT:** Yeah.

**NEWTON:** ... just that they don't have any realistic view.

**ABRECHT:** Or the assumption that the police officer is not liberal.

**NEWTON:** Yes. Which isn't always true, right?

**ABRECHT:** Exactly, yeah, right.

**NEWTON:** I was struck with the description of the woman who wanted to see your gun at the party.

**ABRECHT:** Mm-hmm.

**NEWTON:** And, you know, was quite appalled that you wouldn't take it out and show it around.

**ABRECHT:** Yeah, yeah.

**NEWTON:** But I think that's an example of a cultural difference.

**ABRECHT:** Yeah, uh-huh.

**NEWTON:** That it's not a toy.

**ABRECHT:** Right, right.

**NEWTON:** It's not something you're showing off for the police officer. So, anyway, that scene was particularly striking given that Capitol Hill, it certainly has become a fairly liberal bubble in its way. I guess not completely.

**ABRECHT:** Not completely. I mean it's so, you know ...

**NEWTON:** Cultural bubble perhaps, though.

**ABRECHT:** Yeah, yeah.

**NEWTON:** You know, more upper middle class ...

**ABRECHT:** Yeah. I think, yeah, right.

**NEWTON:** And that, but ...

**ABRECHT:** Well, and the other thing that has definitely changed is the attitude toward women working in traditionally male fields. I mean, that is so accepted now that even ... And, you know, it doesn't, I don't think in a social gathering people give a hoot as to whether you are a stay-at-home mom or a working mother or a single professional, or, you know, whether you're straight or gay. I mean, I think a lot of those issues are very different now.

**NEWTON:** And you're reacting to—the scene in the book one of the big cultural differences were the wives of the police officers who were stay-at-home, had maybe worked early on, but for whom it was a point of pride in the family that they ...

**ABRECHT:** That they didn't have to work. Yes, right.

**NEWTON:** Yes. And, so, they looked at you and many of your friends, you know, and just it felt like a big divide.

**ABRECHT:** Mm-hmm.

**NEWTON:** Yeah. And that was certainly the time period. Lest people say things haven't gotten better ...

**ABRECHT:** Yeah.

**NEWTON:** I think that is a better thing.

**ABRECHT:** Right.

**NEWTON:** Not judging ...

**ABRECHT:** People have choices.

**NEWTON:** ... women, you know, on their choices. Well, I guess some people always judge, but you're not judging on those kinds of choices as much.

**ABRECHT:** Right. And, again, there I think that's probably more true on Capitol Hill than it is in some rural or distant area. So. I think I do need to break here.

**NEWTON:** Yes.

**ABRECHT:** If you want to make a note.

**NEWTON:** So, we will break here and get back at a date soon to discuss loose ends from the police force but also your house at 9 Eighth Street NE.

**ABRECHT:** Right.

**NEWTON:** Thanks, Mary Ellen.

**ABRECHT:** Good.

END OF INTERVIEW 1

START OF INTERVIEW 2

**NEWTON:** Today [March 23, 2018] we are going to pick up on a story from last time that M'El told us about visiting her great-aunt Margaret Van der Zee Whelpley Smith at 9 Eighth Street NE. We are going to go back in history and hear how M'El's family came to occupy that part of the block on Capitol Hill. Let me reference first an article that M'El wrote about what we're talking about today. There's a lot of detail and excerpts from letters and wonderful texture to this. [M'El's full article is available at [http://www.capitolhillhistory.org/interviews/2018/Whelpley\\_family\\_CH.pdf](http://www.capitolhillhistory.org/interviews/2018/Whelpley_family_CH.pdf).]

We're just going to go over the outline today. It all starts with a man named James Winne Whelpley. Can you tell us a little about Mr. Whelpley?

**ABRECHT:** Mr. Whelpley was raised in Albany, New York. He was the eldest son. His father died fairly young and so he went off to work fairly young. Never did any college or higher education, but established himself as a competent clerk and at the beginning of the Civil War he was recruited to come to Washington, DC, by Salmon Chase at Treasury to be a clerk in the Treasury Department. He and many others like him spent their days signing greenbacks.

**NEWTON:** What is a greenback?

**ABRECHT:** It was the currency established by Chase to pay Union soldiers. Ironically when Chase got on the Supreme Court, greenbacks were challenged and although the majority of the Court found them perfectly Constitutional, Chase himself dissented and thought it was an unconstitutional act. Many, many greenbacks. We actually, with the family materials, have one in a frame where you can see both sides with Whelpley's signature on them. Now you can get them on the internet for ancient documents. That was sort of fun. Initially he stayed in boarding house kind of places and sent money home to the family in Albany. Eventually met other young people in Washington and that's when he met my great-grandmother, yes. They met with other young people ice skating.

**NEWTON:** Oh, do you know where?

**ABRECHT:** No, but I get the impression it's a rink that doesn't exist anymore. It was somewhere near downtown. But they met ice skating.

**NEWTON:** This would have been after the Civil War?

**ABRECHT:** Oh no, no, no. Hum, no I guess probably after. Probably after. After their marriage where they lived initially I'm not certain. Probably a boarding house kind of place. In 1875 he had built 800 East Capitol Street [NE] which was the home where they raised their children and lived for many, many years.

**NEWTON:** Before we get to that, can we go back and talk a little about Louisa Russell, your great-grandmother.

**ABRECHT:** There are several generations. They have a Louisa but Whelpley's wife was a Louisa and she had the same name as her mother who was my great-great-grandmother, whose last name was Russell because she had married up in New England a minister who was in poor health and came to Washington following Benjamin Brown French who was his brother-in-law, because his sister was married to Benjamin Brown French, hoping to find work in Washington. The same pattern that's repeated itself generation after generation. Someone gets a job in Washington, others follow hoping to connect. Russell, who had formerly been a minister and had poor health, couldn't manage that work and got a job with the Postal Service.

**NEWTON:** Where did French work?

**ABRECHT:** Postal Service at the time.

**NEWTON:** So he helped?

**ABRECHT:** Yup. Benjamin Brown French kept moving up and he was eventually, he was Commissioner of Public Building in the Lincoln administration and was quite close to Mary Todd Lincoln.

**NEWTON:** Did they all live on Capitol Hill?

**ABRECHT:** The Frenches, the Russells definitely lived on Capitol Hill, yes. The main French estate was torn down in the early 1870s for the Library of Congress. It was in that unit block. Their cottage, a smaller premises on their property, was where the Russells moved.

**NEWTON:** I did see some unit block addresses on Capitol Hill, or on East Capitol Street which was confusing because that's the Library of Congress [Jefferson Building].

**ABRECHT:** That's the Library of Congress, right.

**NEWTON:** Yeah, yeah. So those were all torn down for the Library of Congress, and then I guess it would be the 100 block that would be the Supreme Court and the Folger [Shakespeare Library], right.

**ABRECHT:** Well the Supreme Court is across the street from the Library of Congress in the unit block [actually the 100 block NE; the Capitol grounds occupy the unit block].

**NEWTON:** It's all institutional Washington now, not houses.

**ABRECHT:** Now, yes. All those transactions occurred in the early 1870s. It wasn't until 1875 that the 800 East Capitol Street home was built.

**NEWTON:** I did just want to follow up a little bit on James Whelpley's employer at the Treasury Department, Francis Spinner, because there were some funny stories about—interesting stories.

**ABRECHT:** Spinner is noted for two things. One, hiring women in great numbers for the first time in the Civil Service, which he is both lauded for and criticized for. The good news was he gave a lot of women good government jobs. One of the reasons he was able to sell it was that he didn't have to pay them as much as he paid the men, and their daintier fingers made them better at, at least typewriters, but I think there was some other thing that Treasury Department was using that required a smaller and light touch. The other thing he was very famous for that I believe he developed at Treasury, was a unique John Hancock, a unique signature that was impossible to forge. It is so famous that even on the statue which was made of him in his honor, which says the thing he proudest of was the hiring of women, but includes his signature.

**NEWTON:** Is it legible? Can you read the signature?

**ABRECHT:** Oh it's absolutely legible. But it's very elaborate. In the family papers we have some correspondence back and forth between James Winne Whelpley and Spinner after he retired which includes, of course, his famous signature.

**NEWTON:** So he used it even in personal correspondence.

**ABRECHT:** Yes, yes.

**NEWTON:** The greenbacks that Whelpley was signing, did that exist parallel to regular legal tender? Or was that a wartime substitute for...

**ABRECHT:** I don't really know the answer to that.

**NEWTON:** Speaking of signature, I was wondering what it was that Spinner signed that required ...

**ABRECHT:** Oh bonds and whatever. The other thing in the 1870s, Whelpley did a lot of traveling to Europe and out to California because a lot of these bonds and various things were hand carried and hand delivered by Treasury employees.

**NEWTON:** He seemed to have been looking for business opportunities sometimes when he did these trips, as well on the side.

**ABRECHT:** Oh yeah. He was young and restless. Of course the country, after the war particularly, was expanding and everybody had a deal. Come to Indiana and we need a bank here. You can find it. There's land in the south that you can have a great farm. He was always exploring. Friends and relatives would always invite him to come wherever they were and start over. Like most government employees he was always on the lookout, but he ended up staying put.

**NEWTON:** For the whole time.

**ABRECHT:** Yep

**NEWTON:** There was a description in your article about him sitting basically signing these greenbacks for nine and a half hour work days. I can see why something else might be appealing after ...

**ABRECHT:** He was promoted and eventually was—the title I get confused. There's the Secretary of the Treasury, and there's the—anyway there's several different titles, and he ultimately is the presidential appointee as an Assistant Secretary of the Treasury or whatever under Cleveland.

**NEWTON:** I can see why he didn't leave. He rose there. Let's see. We'll go back to the personal life. He married Louisa Richardson, right.

**ABRECHT:** Louisa Richardson Russell, then Whelpley because her mother had married a Russell.

**NEWTON:** Okay. That was in 1871, and in 1875 then they received a permit to build 800 East Capitol Street. For people that don't know, that's a pretty good-sized house for Capitol Hill as it exists now. It's a free-standing house on the corner. Not attached to anything else.

**ABRECHT:** With of course stables in the backyard.

**NEWTON:** Oh. The stables weren't built right away, right.

**ABRECHT:** I think they were. They ultimately became garages of course. No, they were—as soon as they moved in they needed a place for their horse and carriage.

**NEWTON:** That's true. Where's the backyard because the current house doesn't really ...

**ABRECHT:** Yes it does. It faces Eighth Street. The front door of 800 East Capitol is on East Capitol, but the backyard is on the Eighth Street side and the stables/garages are sort of at the back side of what is now a backyard and they face Eighth Street.

**NEWTON:** Oh it's what is there still.

**ABRECHT:** Yes.

**NEWTON:** Oh, okay. All I remember is parking there. I guess it's been incorporated into the house by now.



800 East Capitol Street NE, Washington, DC, in 1893 (left) and after a complete renovation circa 2006 (right).  
The building partly obscured by a tree at the left side of the 21st century picture is 9 Eighth Street NE.

**ABRECHT:** What do you mean by that?

**NEWTON:** The stable part now.

**ABRECHT:** There are three—it's blocked by a high fence now, but before that fence was put up by the Reeds, the three garage faces were visible and tenants in what had become an apartment building at 800, parked there in the yard. It was at the north edge of that lot where in 1904 they built a row house which is where my great-aunt was living and where we met her at 9 Eighth Street, NE. That was the north edge of the back lot of 800 East Capitol.

**NEWTON:** With the alley then behind that.

**ABRECHT:** The alley was not there. That was a side yard. The side yard was—became an alley, which is why 9 Eighth Street now occupies more of its existing lot than would be permitted. It's grandfathered in because the city took the side yard to make an alley. Of course when both 9 Eighth Street and 800 East Capitol were all the same family there was mutual use of the garage or stables but when 800 was sold off,

it was sold all the way to the wall of 9 Eighth Street and all the garages became part of the 800 East Capitol lot. Our feeble efforts over the years to try to buy at least one of them for our own parking was not successful.

**NEWTON:** So that's why 9 Eighth Street—though it doesn't have any houses on either side—it's pretty hemmed in by everything. We're getting ahead of the story just slightly. The Whelpleys married and promptly had, how many children?

**ABRECHT:** Three.

**NEWTON:** Three children.

**ABRECHT:** No four, four. I'm sorry, four, I forgot my grandmother. [laughter]

**NEWTON:** We don't want to do that.

**ABRECHT:** Three of them stayed in the area. My grandmother, when she became of age, married and moved to New England.

**NEWTON:** Oh, okay. It was for one of those children, grown children, that they built 9 Eighth Street?

**ABRECHT:** Yup. The eldest, the son, his starter house was 9 Eighth Street and he was an engineer and eventually moved to Maryland, wanted a boat, wanted access to water and what have you. When he left 9 Eighth Street, his two sisters who were, neither of them was married, moved into 9 Eighth Street. That was my great-aunt Margaret Van der Zee Whelpley Smith. But she wasn't yet Smith. Margaret moved in with her older sister who was another Louisa. The two of them lived there together for many years, and Louisa died relatively young and Margaret married late, but married a Hill person who played in the [Marine] band under John Phillip Sousa.

**NEWTON:** This was the guy who knit the ice tea cozies.

**ABRECHT:** Cozies, yeah the glass cozies, yes. We still have many of his, much of his work.

**NEWTON:** I did want to just touch on a sad part of the story which was James Whelpley's wife who died relatively early. I think the thing that was the saddest to me was something that her mother had written to her, written down. Her mother was like 73 and figuring that she was at the end of her life and Louisa was a young mother of four in her 40s some time. I don't know if you want to read the quote?

**ABRECHT:** Mrs. Russell wrote to her daughter Louisa, "You were a good baby and have been a comfort to me all your life. I want to tell you while I can so that when I'm gone you need not have a single regret

about you what you might have done for me.” Of course the problem was that in the end the mother outlived the daughter. Louisa died in 1893 at only age 47 and her mother, Mrs. Russell, lived into her 90s and ended up helping raise her [Louisa’s] children. The great-aunt who I got to know was only, what maybe nine or so when her mother died.

**NEWTON:** That could have been a real tragedy for the family; I mean I’m sure it was a tragedy for the family, but sometimes that introduced stepmothers or something else into a family, but because Mrs. Russell was still there ...

**ABRECHT:** She actually moved into 800 with her son-in-law.

**NEWTON:** Oh, did she? So he was free to continue to travel and do things because he has someone at home to help.

**ABRECHT:** Immediately after her death, he commissioned a women watercolorist in Washington to do her portrait from a photo.

**NEWTON:** Louisa his wife?

**ABRECHT:** Yes. When Mrs. Whelpley, Louisa Whelpley died, Mr. Whelpley commissioned her portrait. That portrait hung in the living room at 800 East Capitol for many, many years. [In] All the photographs of the family sitting around, you can see the portrait over the mantel. When 800 East Capitol was sold out of the family, that portrait moved to 9 Eighth Street and was still there when my husband and I bought the house in 1970.

It would scare little children. It had an old gilded frame and what have you. We kept it but had it in the wall in the basement. When we finally moved, I took it out of the frame that was falling apart. I took it out and unfortunately it had not been framed according to conservation principles and it was stained and it was cardboard backing and what have you. But in taking it out of the frame people pointed out that it was signed by the artist. I spent several years casually contacting various people around town about having it taken over. Just this year the DAR [Daughters of the American Revolution] has accepted it as a donation. They now have it. [The National] Portrait Gallery wasn’t interested because she wasn’t famous. DAR did do some research on the artist who, among other things, had also done portraits of the head of the DAR.

**NEWTON:** Oh wow. That makes it—what was the name of the artist?

**ABRECHT:** I don’t have it off the top of my head, but I can provide it. She was somewhat prominent. Yes, Katherine Chipman. She was well respected at the time. Unfortunately her portrait of the DAR head was destroyed because that woman for some reason wanted all her portraits destroyed. That and the fact

that all of my relatives on Capitol Hill either actually were DAR or at least were eligible for DAR membership was enough of a connection that the DAR did accept the portrait, so it is now.

**NEWTON:** It's nice to think that it will also be cared for and preserved at least in the situation it is now.

**ABRECHT:** Right.

**NEWTON:** Why was it scary to children? Was she a fierce looking person?

**ABRECHT:** No, no, no, it's just that any portrait from the 1800s, they all looked severe.

**NEWTON:** Unsmiling, yeah.

**ABRECHT:** Right, right, yeah.

**NEWTON:** They sold the house at 800 East Capitol in I guess 1920, somewhere around in there. The two sisters went to live in ...

**ABRECHT:** Were already living at 9 Eighth.

**NEWTON:** Okay. Did anyone move from 800? Their grandmother was already dead by that point do you think?

**ABRECHT:** Yes but Whelpley sort of split his time between there and back to his original home in Albany. So he came and went.

**NEWTON:** Did he still have family left in Albany? Is that why he split his time or he just ...

**ABRECHT:** I'm sure he did because he was the oldest and had a lot of siblings.

**NEWTON:** You said three of his kids stayed in Washington. Where did the fourth one go?

**ABRECHT:** The fourth one was my grandmother.

**NEWTON:** Oh that's right. Whose name was?

**ABRECHT:** Whose name was Mary Ellen.

**NEWTON:** I did see a lot of Mary Ellens in addition to Louisas.

**ABRECHT:** Mary Ellen Whelpley and then she married a Ballard. Even more than today, in those days before air conditioning people did everything possible to get out of Washington in the summer. My ancestors all had friends and family and connections in New England, so often spent as much time as they

possibly could in New England during the summers, and it was in Western Massachusetts that my grandmother met William Ballard. When she married him they settled in Western Massachusetts.

**NEWTON:** How many kids did they have?

**ABRECHT:** They had four children as well. My mother was the oldest. She was their first child.

**NEWTON:** Was that family still there?

**ABRECHT:** No. All those siblings have now died, but no, I don't—my uncle stayed and had a career at Dartmouth [College] until his death. But I think the next generation has all gone. No there aren't that many still in Western Mass [Massachusetts].

**NEWTON:** I hate to jump back and forth chronologically but I forgot to ask you a little more, and speaking of cousins and other relatives, this would do it. Is the French family who it was—oh go ahead.

**ABRECHT:** Their connection; a lot of this family were up in New England. In fact Chester, New Hampshire.

**NEWTON:** Is where Daniel Chester...

**ABRECHT:** Where Daniel Chester French gets his middle name. My, I guess, great-great-great-grandfather was chief justice of the New Hampshire Supreme Court, last name Richardson, lived in Chester and had a couple of daughters. One of them fell in love with Benjamin Brown French who was a wild go-getter from the start. In fact they actually eloped. He took his wife to Washington, DC. We're talking 1840s. That was a sister of my great-great-grandmother. It was a number of years after they settled in Washington that my great-great-grandmother ...

**NEWTON:** Her sister.

**ABRECHT:** and her husband, yeah, followed looking for work.

**NEWTON:** Okay. So the Whelpley children then grew up around French cousins in Washington.

**ABRECHT:** Oh, absolutely, yes. There were in addition to Benjamin Brown French, he had a brother here. Yeah, there were Frenches everywhere. All over Capitol Hill. On one branch was the Daniel Chester French, [the] young artist who actually went back and spent most of his young adulthood back in Massachusetts.

**NEWTON:** And he's most famous for?

**ABRECHT:** The Lincoln Memorial.

**NEWTON:** The statue, right?

**ABRECHT:** Yes.

**NEWTON:** Which is still very moving.

**ABRECHT:** Yes. In fact there's half a dozen other sculptures in Washington by him. He was prolific. And also there's [one] at Harvard and anyway he did a lot.

**NEWTON:** He would be the most famous probably of the clan at this point.

**ABRECHT:** It depends on what your field is. But certainly he was a famous sculptor, yes. And he married a Mary Ellen.

**NEWTON:** An in-law Mary Ellen.

**ABRECHT:** Who was a first cousin. Fact he did a lot of research. They had met as cousins and really liked each other but were concerned about whether it was appropriate to marry a cousin.

**NEWTON:** Were they first cousins?

**ABRECHT:** Yeah, they were first cousins, but they did marry. Did have one child.

**NEWTON:** This was a second marriage for him?

**ABRECHT:** No, no, no, no his first marriage. Just another Washington story. They planned the wedding here on Capitol Hill for, I don't remember, June or July, but some day could be very hot. It turned out to be very hot. His wife Mary Ellen decided that there was no way she was going to put on the long sleeve, white wedding gown that she had planned for the wedding. So she wore a sundress they both liked instead to be comfortable. [laughter]

**NEWTON:** Well that's kind of free-spirited of her. When was this event, I mean roughly? Is this like turn of the century or earlier?

**ABRECHT:** I don't remember exactly. I've got it on the family tree dates. I can certainly find it.

**NEWTON:** I will look it up and put it into the transcript. But that is lovely. So, James Whelpley, back to him. In his retirement then, he lived partly in ...

**ABRECHT:** Mainly here in Washington but more and more in Albany. Yes and he was always civic-minded. He was in the Masons. Having been treasurer, he was definitely into banking. He was one of the founders of the American Security Bank at Ninth and East Capitol [Streets]. [He] was on the Board of Education when it was doing a lot of expansion, Eastern High School among other things. One curious letter I found in the files was a letter to him—I can't remember what state it was from—from a woman somewhere who was writing him to ask about his experience of having women on the Board of Education because they did it here in DC, apparently without comment. Wherever she lived it was considered taboo and very controversial, so she wanted him to reassure people in her town that it was a good and proper thing to have women on your board of education. [laughs]

**NEWTON:** Did you find his response to that?

**ABRECHT:** No, no.

**NEWTON:** Oh, wonder what it would have been? [laughs]

**ABRECHT:** Father of a couple of strong-minded daughters, I assume he was, said, "What's the big deal?" I don't know for a fact.

**NEWTON:** At least one of those daughters was a graduate of Eastern High School, right? Did I see that?

**ABRECHT:** I believe so, yes. At one point one of the girls was at Sidwell [Sidwell Friends School, 3825 Wisconsin Avenue NW, Washington, DC]. There was a lot of back and forth because the mother died when they were still in school.

**NEWTON:** Maybe it was Margaret, the youngest then that went to Eastern, because it would have been certainly the closest here. I'd like also to talk about the connections with Congressional Cemetery because most on the Hill will be familiar with that. Can you maybe start at the beginning of that?

**ABRECHT:** A lot of family plots back there. Of course lots of people died young back in those days too. Mr. Whelpley established a monument when his wife died when she was 47. In that same plot, he is eventually buried as are his two DC daughters. My grandmother who was in New England is buried in New England. The youngest daughter was buried there after we moved to Washington in 1970. I was actually there for her burial. At that point there was still more space. In recent years a cousin and I have both arranged ourselves and our husbands to be added to that plot in due course.

**NEWTON:** I think I've seen that monument as I walk the dog there a lot. It's right near the chapel isn't it?

**ABRECHT:** Not far from the chapel. There are a number of Frenches buried there. There are Russells buried there. There are several family-related plots at Congressional.

**NEWTON:** I think they've even named one of the streets, you know the streets, the alley, whatever you call those. The roads that are there. I think they've even named one of those after Daniel Chester French, I think. I'm pretty sure. That was more recent like within the last 10, 15 years.

**ABRECHT:** I'm not even certain that Daniel Chester French is buried there. I don't know. But there are a lot of Frenches there.

**NEWTON:** But famous.

**ABRECHT:** That's true.

**NEWTON:** Famous name I think. It's a cousin from New England or a cousin ...

**ABRECHT:** The other cousin is now living in Washington DC but she is my mother's sister's daughter and she actually grew up in Great Falls, Virginia. Her parents having met both as professors at Mount Holyoke College in New England and then her father was recruited by the CIA for code work during the war and they settled here.

**NEWTON:** We talked a little last time about Margaret's older life in 9 Eighth Street, but we might want to just dot that "i". She lived there though the riots in '68. In fact was partly your family's interest in having someone check on her regularly that got you visiting, at least initially, right?

**ABRECHT:** Yes.

**NEWTON:** Though she was a fun person you said. Someone you wanted to visit anyway.

**ABRECHT:** Yes. Once we met her.

**NEWTON:** How old was she when she died?

**ABRECHT:** She was 87 when she died. We met her on her 86<sup>th</sup> birthday.

**NEWTON:** And she had lived there on her own after her— well her sister ...

**ABRECHT:** First, she and her sister were together. Her sister died.

**NEWTON:** Roughly when?

**ABRECHT:** 1930s.

**NEWTON:** Oh, okay.

**ABRECHT:** She was there alone for a while and she married Walter Smith after his wife died the year he retired from the Marine Corps Band. They married and he moved into 9 Eighth Street with her, but they spent a couple of years out in Ohio working for a music company. He was perfecting mouthpieces for brass instruments. In fact we inherited, what we got with the house, a bag full of brass mouthpieces. [laughter] He was much older than she anyway. He then died and she continued to live on at 9 Eighth Street. At some point she hired a woman from West Virginia to be her sort-of live-in companion. Grace Griffin who worked during the day at the Farmer's Market in Northeast [DC], but was there to help her with meals and be a live-in companion, whatever.

**NEWTON:** So she lived either alone or with Grace for 20, 25 years probably or longer?

**ABRECHT:** Yeah. She was still there with Grace when we first met her in 1969. When she was hospitalized with another heart attack in 1970, Grace moved out and moved around the corner to live in the home of Mary Jerrell who was also someone who's been interviewed for the Overbeck Project.

**NEWTON:** Oh, is that right [laughs]? Margaret wasn't able to live on her own, right.

**ABRECHT:** She never returned from the hospital. When it became clear that she would never live independently again is when the family asked my husband and me to move in to protect, to make sure the house wasn't vacant and to protect it until such time my great aunt died or recognized that she couldn't return and would agree to sell it.

**NEWTON:** That was 40 years—

**ABRECHT:** Later, well, that was later in 1970.

**NEWTON:** Yeah, so you then lived in the house, raised your two kids in the house and lived there until fairly recently, right?

**ABRECHT:** Right. We sold it to the next generation.

**NEWTON:** As I said earlier, I counted four generations of your family in that house. When you took it over then it was full of Margaret's stuff?

**ABRECHT:** Absolutely; nightgowns still hanging on the bedroom door.

**NEWTON:** Oh, my gosh. Did you over time buy other things? Did you have to buy other things?

**ABRECHT:** Some of the furniture was so old that it would collapse when you sat on it. If you came to dinner you were either given a chair or you moved the chair to the trash because it broke under your weight. A lot of the furniture was pretty but uncomfortable Victorian style couches and stuff and my older teenage daughter said, “Mom if ever want me to bring my date home, you’ve got to get rid of that couch. I’m not going to entertain a boyfriend on that couch.”

**NEWTON:** [laughs] So, replaced as needed. Tell me a little about how you researched the article. Were a lot of those materials in that house?

**ABRECHT:** It started soon after we actually moved into the house we sort of started exploring and there were, like in every old house, drawers full of amazing things. One of the things we discovered was a cache of letters. Not so much to and from 9 Eighth Street, although that’s where they were. It was to and from 800 East Capitol and even earlier. But they’d been preserved and my aunt, my mother’s sister from whom we had purchased the house, was just retired and was interested in history. So she took the cache of letters and did a lot of wonderful research. She was particularly interested in the economics of it. Some of the questions you asked about greenbacks and money and stuff, she would know the answer to that because that was the kind of thing she researched. She not only recorded all these letters, but did the research to put them in context through the history and did a wonderful job.

Unfortunately, her connection was more through the male line, her emotional connection worked from the male line, so she gave the originals of those letters to the Russell connection in Old Deerfield, Massachusetts, even though they were all Washington related. She eventually passed on as did her older brother and one of the daughters of her older brother, cousin of mine, discovered in my uncle’s closet, another envelope full of letters that were sometimes were response to letters we had had at 9 Eighth Street. The funny thing is that he had no idea what he had in his closet. And his sister who was doing all this research had no idea that this was in his closet. [laughter] So they didn’t get together until I got them. I eventually not only read them all and transcribed them and what have you. I gave the originals of these which all had DC connections to the document division of the Library of Congress, which has a major French collection as well and they interfaced with that. We simply include in the documentation there a note that the originals of the related letters are up in Old Deerfield.

**NEWTON:** How are they preserved in Old Deerfield? Are they still in the family?

**ABRECHT:** No, no. It’s a museum.

**NEWTON:** Okay, so they’ve given them to an institution as well.

**ABRECHT:** Yeah, no, no, yeah, right.

**NEWTON:** I must be a wonderful treasure trove for people to be able to see both sides of a correspondence.

**ABRECHT:** But is it interesting how they're split. I have—talking about scaring little children—I do have some photographic portraits of the Russells. Mrs. Russell and Mr. Russell and they do scare little children. I tried to give them away. Nobody will take them. Old Deerfield wouldn't take them because they spend most of their life in Washington. Even though the letters are they had no interest in the portraits.

**NEWTON:** And those are some of the people that wrote the letters, right?

**ABRECHT:** Yes. The most prolific letter writer was Mrs. Russell.

**NEWTON:** Who was, now let's put in context?

**ABRECHT:** My great-great-grandmother.

**NEWTON:** That's Louisa...

**ABRECHT:** Well, it's one of the Louisas.

**NEWTON:** It's the mother of ...

**ABRECHT:** Mother of—her daughter died young.

**NEWTON:** Oh, Mrs. Whelpley.

**ABRECHT:** She's the mother of Mrs. Whelpley, yes. Yeah, she's the Mrs. Russell who helped raise her grandchildren.

**NEWTON:** There are a lot of lovely pictures of things including the greenback. Was the greenback found among these letters as well, or where did you find that?

**ABRECHT:** The greenback actually, I think, I got from my aunt.

**NEWTON:** The one doing the research?

**ABRECHT:** Yes. That had stayed in the family as was, you know, on many family walls over the years, yeah.

**NEWTON:** I'm sure it was a conversation starter. [laughs]

**ABRECHT:** Yes, yes.

**NEWTON:** Another thing I noticed; I don't think you had a picture of it, but was the rosette from Lincoln's ...

**ABRECHT:** Oh yes, which I eventually gave to downtown, the Lincoln—Ford's Theater.

**NEWTON:** Ford's Theater, yeah.

**ABRECHT:** We don't know exactly its provenance, but on—it was in a frame and passed through the family, and it is said it was clipped from the funeral catafalque. A black silk rosette that would have been on a corner.

**NEWTON:** That's the thing that was paraded through the streets?

**ABRECHT:** Again, I don't know whether it was what laid in state at the Capitol, paraded around. Apparently there were more than one. Whether it was clipped by Whelpley who was working for Treasury at the time. Whether it was Benjamin Brown French who had a lot to do with the funeral preparations as Commissioner of Public Buildings. Who snipped it and how it got into the family is a little unclear.

**NEWTON:** That was an interesting thing. Certainly the oral history of it is fascinating.

**ABRECHT:** Little clips of souvenirs. We hear now about people saving hair and what have you. BB French also brought to our family a bit of leftover wallpaper selected by Mary Todd Lincoln. They papered a little corner of one of the places on East Capitol Street with this Parisian wallpaper that was left over from the White House. That kind of thing. Little tidbits of Washington memories.

**NEWTON:** BB French was, you said, the Superintendent of ...

**ABRECHT:** Commissioner of Public Buildings under Lincoln. So he was in charge of expenses. He got into a lot of trouble because of Mary Todd Lincoln's extravagance in spending money. He sometimes had to sort of cover for it.

**NEWTON:** But he had a good relationship with her?

**ABRECHT:** Yes, yep.

**NEWTON:** Maybe took some of the flak. She got a lot if I'm not mistaken.

**ABRECHT:** It went beyond his professional—for example, I was just reading today, haven't finished yet, the *Team of Rivals* and the talk about at some big reception, his [BB French] standing by her and comforting her because it was one of her first receptions after Willie had died. He was supportive of her

and sometimes ran interference for her. Also after the assassination and after Mary Todd left town, there were lots of congressional inquiries about funding of this, that and the other thing. The result was, BB French was never indicted or charged or, you know, there was nothing criminal involved, but they did abolish the position of Commissioner of Public Buildings. He was in charge both of the U.S. Capitol and of the White House and they separated those two functions among other things.

**NEWTON:** I don't know that that would have stopped extravagance but at least it puts it under someone else.

I think that's about it. There was one other thing I wanted to ask and that is, do you think feminism runs in families? I mean when you were reading old letters did you have any sense that—I love the story of the woman who just got married in the sundress. That shows a certain independence of spirit I think.

**ABRECHT:** It was definitely—they were spunky. These women were definitely spunky. I don't see anything in either the letters or challenging their lesser role in public life and what have you. During the war they were running back and forth to the hospitals and doing relief work. None of them in those early generations had college education where their brothers did. They were clearly well read and literate and wrote beautifully, but there was no urge to vote.

In fact one rather disappointing moment—I had found in the papers at 9 Eighth Street a program for the women's suffragette convention. Susan B. Anthony was there and anyway I was so delighted in it. It had all these wonderful old hymns that were about women's right to vote and what have you. My aunt was already out of the home at that point in a nursing home or something. I was so excited I brought it with me and I read it to her. "Oh, did you or your sisters or your mother or somebody attend this? I mean how wonderful!" And she just bristled and said, "Uh, no. We had nothing to do with those women who wore bloomers!" [laughter] It was clear not only was she not part of the suffragette movement, she was not supportive either. She pointed out that her father, because of his official position, you know, always received invitations to things like that, but, you know, yeah. I was very disappointed to learn that this very spunky, very in some ways independent woman was not the least bit an early feminist. [laughter]

**NEWTON:** I guess each generation does what it can. Certainly in your discussion of all the women—we're talking Civil War now to your experiences—I think they've shown a certain amount of progress that we can be proud of.

**ABRECHT:** Yeah. It was interesting, it was the grandmother who went to Western Massachusetts, married Ballard, and on the Ballard side they knew and were friendly with a lot of independent women. In

fact, knew Mary Lyon, the founder of Mount Holyoke College and her family and her early schools. Although my grandmother did not attend college, both of her daughters attended Mount Holyoke College.

**NEWTON:** Early enough on to be notable.

**ABRECHT:** In 1928, my mother was class of 1928. Her younger sister was class of 1932. Both of them went from there on to do graduate work; my mother at Columbia, her sister at Harvard, or at Radcliffe. Resented to the day she died that she took all her courses at Harvard and had a Radcliffe degree and Harvard wouldn't recognize it. The strong educated women who came from Western Massachusetts were not mimicked by the Washington women.

**NEWTON:** Huh. Interesting because I feel like now people come here because of education and the jobs they can get with it whereas, as you say, Whelpley came without even a high school, or at least with a high school degree.

**ABRECHT:** I think he probably finished high school. yeah.

**NEWTON:** You could say that's it the college education that made the rest of the women in the family uppity. It's progress. I think that's all the questions I had. If there's nothing more that you want to say?

**ABRECHT:** I can't think of anything.

**NEWTON:** Alrighty, well it's been a pleasure. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW