

Allee Watson
Current and Historical Resident of Rosegate
Route 9 Oral History Project

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Abstract

Allee Watson bought his home in Rosegate in 1963 and has lived there ever since. In this interview, he discusses how he came to settle in Rosegate, comments on the purchasing process, describes the demographics and occupations of the community there, briefly treats the topic of race, and reflects on ways the neighborhood has changed through the years.

Watson's parents had moved north from Kenton and purchased their new home in Rosegate in 1961 or 1962 to be closer to his father's work at a steel plant in New Castle. Watson soon followed and, in 1963 at the age of 22, purchased his own new home for \$10,500 in the new development around the corner from his parents' home, settling there with his wife and two young children. For him, owning his Rosegate home "meant a lot" and represented stability. It was also a great improvement from the housing he had had in Kenton. He says he elected to pay an extra \$500 for a house with central air conditioning, something his parents had decided against.

Watson says that the transition from living in rural Delaware to living in a townhome was difficult for him and that he turned to gardening to cope. He still finds great joy in his garden and has inspired other neighbors to install gardens over the years. Watson notes that he was otherwise very happy with his home, except for the small size of its attic. Changes he has made have been mostly on the exterior, such as adding front and back patios, fencing his back yard, and replacing his windows. Over the years, many Rosegate residents fenced their front yards—perhaps, Watson speculates, to keep others from walking across them, since there are no sidewalks in the subdivision. Others have moved their driveways. He recalls few other architectural renovations within the neighborhood.

Watson says that the process of financing his home was easy and remembers that, at the time he purchased, there were many more owners than renters in Rosegate. While there was a great deal of interest in purchasing in Rosegate, many of the units sat vacant for a while, perhaps because many people were unable to secure financing. His own home, he says, was empty for a year after its construction until he purchased it. He notes that housing was limited for African Americans in the 1960s and that they were not welcome to purchase in Simonds Gardens, Overview Gardens, Garfield Park, Holloway Terrace, or Collins Park, where they "didn't even want a Black garbage collector." Watson relates that, in 1967, a cross was burned in the yard of one of his friends who lived in Simonds Gardens, a period when white homeowners there were moving out as the neighborhood rapidly integrated.

Watson remembers Rosegate holding a mix of young families with children, like his, and adults in their 50s, like his parents. Some, like his family, were from downstate Delaware, and Watson remembers others from Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia. Many had relocated to Delaware because of the availability of work. Watson recalls his father saying, "If you couldn't find a job in Wilmington, Delaware, you couldn't find a job anywhere." His neighbors worked at Chrysler, General Motors, DuPont, Motorwheel, West Virginia Pulp and Paper, and the local steel mill, among other places. Most families had at least one car, but Watson says that there was a lot of public transportation available, too. The neighborhood never had much crime, Watson reports, because "everybody knew everybody." He describes it as a close-knit community.

While there were no streetlights in Rosegate when Watson first lived there, the civic association petitioned the county for streetlights, which were installed around 1965. Having served on the civic association from the 1990s through 2010, Watson is proud of the role he played in getting two parks and basketball courts installed in the neighborhood. The civic association also established additional parking areas in the neighborhood because the homes in Rosegate had small driveways.

Kids in the neighborhood attended Rose Hill Elementary, progressing to Colwyck for junior high, and then De La Warr for high school. Watson recalls an annual Rosegate-organized trip for neighborhood kids and beyond to Great Adventure during the 1970s. He remembers Dunleith as a center of community for those in Rosegate, in part because kids would head to Surratte Park for recreation. He also remembers kids going to Eden Park and playing basketball in the streets of Rosegate.

Beginning in the 1980s, Watson says that he saw both crime and drug activity in the neighborhood increase. He believes this began when older owners began passing away and their houses were converted to rentals. Watson observes that today there are very few owners in Rosegate and estimates that about three-fourths of the homes are rented, many under Section 8. He says that while it was almost all-African American for decades, today there are many Hispanic, African, and Caribbean residents, and a handful of white residents. Watson feels that the close-knit sense of community in the neighborhood is mostly gone now. He reports that his son is still in touch with many of the kids he grew up with in Rosegate.