

Octavia Penny Dryden
Former Rosegate Resident
Route 9 Oral History Project

Interviewed by: Michael Emmons, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware

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Abstract

Octavia Penny Dryden is an environmental justice advocate and the founder and Executive Director of Community Housing and Empowerment Connections, the director of the Delaware Environmental Justice Community Partnership, and co-author of *Environmental Justice for Delaware, Mitigating Toxic Pollution in New Castle County Communities*, published by the Union of Concerned Scientists in 2017. She is a current resident of a community along the Route 9/New Castle Avenue corridor and a former resident of the Rosegate subdivision. Her parents purchased a new home in the Rosegate development in about 1963, when Penny was four or five years old, and she was a resident there until around 1987.

In this interview, Penny Dryden recalls growing up in Rosegate, describes the close-knit community there, discusses the racial dynamics in the area in the 1960s and 1970s, remarks on ways in which the community and characteristics of the architecture have changed through the years, and closes the interview with a discussion of her work on improving environmental conditions along Route 9.

Transplants from North Carolina, Penny's parents lived in a rented apartment and worked for the Anchor Hocking Glass Company in Salem, New Jersey, where she was born. They learned about Rosegate from family members who lived in the nearby Millside complex and were attracted by Rosegate's proximity to family, to their work (across the Delaware Memorial Bridge, which was only a short distance from Rosegate), by its affordability, and by the space it afforded their family of seven. Dryden describes her family's and other families' pride in homeownership at Rosegate and remembers more people owning properties there than renting.

Dryden recalls when her family first moved into Rosegate, describing their new home as amazing, beautiful, open, and spacious. She and her siblings particularly loved the shiny, new hardwood floors, which they would slide around on in their socks. She was also impressed by the spaciousness of the back yard.

There were many families with multiple children in the development, and Dryden recalls that Rosegate was a safe, comfortable, and fun place to grow up. The development had no dedicated park when she was a child, so the children improvised with an open plot of ground bounded by Thorn Lane and Thorn Court. She remembers this space as a community focal point. Over time, some families fenced their backyards; the fences at the front of the houses were added only later. Some families made additions at the back of their houses over the years, and many updated kitchens or bathrooms.

Many residents of the development made what Dryden describes as “decent incomes,” working at Chrysler, General Motors, DuPont, and other companies. Many came from lower Delaware, Maryland, or the Southern United States. Describing the ethnic makeup of the developments along Route 9, Dryden indicates that Rosegate’s residents were Black, but they went to middle (Colwyck) and high school (De La Warr) with white children. She recalls some ethnic tension and hostility in the schools in the late 1960s and into the early 1970s, particularly following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the final 10 minutes of the interview, Dryden discusses environmental justice issues facing the community, highlighting the cumulative health effects of exposure to harmful pollution from the adjacent industrial developments, port, and municipal landfill, along with the pollution from truck traffic along Route 9 and into the communities.