

CENTER FOR HISTORIC ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN



Lived Experiences of the Post-World War II Neighborhoods along Route 9 / New Castle Avenue: An Oral History Report



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along Route 9 / New Castle Avenue: An Oral History Report

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1.1 Project Overview

This project was undertaken by the Center for Historic Architecture and Design (CHAD) at the University of Delaware on behalf of the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT), to record oral histories related to twentieth century residential development, specifically race-related settlement patterns, of the New Castle Avenue/Route 9 corridor, southeast of the City of Wilmington, in New Castle County, Delaware. Seventeen informants who lived in various neighborhoods along the Route 9 corridor provided previously unrecorded details and recollections that enhanced the understanding of Post-World War II residential life in this part of New Castle County. Included in this report is a summary of key findings and themes, a finding aid for this collection, written transcripts for each interview, and abstracts of each individual interview, containing short biographies and interview summaries. Audio and video files of each interview also accompany this report.

1.2 Project Context

In January 2021, as part of an annual grant project, the Center for Historic Architecture and Design (CHAD) at the University of Delaware partnered with the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) to undertake a historic context on residential subdivisions along the New Castle Avenue/Route 9 corridor. The project, which was multi-phased, was designed to help understand the history related to settlement patterns in the area, specifically race-related settlement patterns and environmental justice concerns. Each neighborhood in the study area received a background history, architectural analysis, and national and local context for suburbanization, specifically related to inequitable housing policies and options for Black Americans. For Phase 1 of the project, the historic context focused on seven post-World War II subdivisions constructed south of the City of Wilmington and north of Interstate 295. For Phase 2 of the project, five post-World War II neighborhoods south of Interstate 295 and north of the City of New Castle were researched. Additionally, during Phase 2 of the project, the background histories of four pre-World War II neighborhoods (Buttonwood, Eden Park Gardens, Hamilton Park, and Holloway Terrace) were researched and discussed in the “Background History of the New Castle Avenue/Route 9 Corridor” section. For Phase 3 of the project, one pre-World War II neighborhood, Minquadale, was researched and discussed in the “Background History of the New Castle Avenue/Route 9 Corridor” section.

This area of New Castle County has been overlooked by historic preservationists and has been the focus of little architectural survey and historical research and few National Register nominations or even determinations of eligibility studies. Previous work undertaken in this area has focused on archaeology and recordation of threatened (and now demolished) eighteenth and nineteenth century dwellings associated with wealthier white people. The first two phases of this project focused on writing a historic context, “Development of Residential Subdivisions along the Route 9/New Castle Avenue Corridor, 1945-1970+/- A Historic and Architectural Context,” that explored the residential growth along the New Castle Avenue/Route 9 corridor after World War II. This project was designed to tell a more robust and inclusive story of the residential settlement of this portion of New Castle County. Additionally, to tell a more inclusive story, a large component of Phase 2 and Phase 3 of the project was to record oral histories with long-time residents from various communities along the New Castle Avenue corridor and in Phase 3 produce this oral history report. Thirteen oral histories were recorded with 18 different community members between January 2022 and June 2023. Oral history informants came from the communities of Rosegate, Rose Hill Gardens, Castle Hills, Dunleith, Oakmont, Rizzo Avenue, Buttonwood, and Holloway Terrace.

1.3 Research Focus and Objectives

The primary objective of this project was to record oral histories from residents of the New Castle Avenue /Route 9 corridor who lived in this area of New Castle County after World War II, specifically in the years 1945-1985. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, this area of New Castle County was transformed from a mostly agricultural area (with some industry) into a predominantly residential and industrial one. This residential growth along New Castle Avenue intensified after World War II, and several post-war neighborhoods were constructed along the New Castle Avenue corridor. Some of these neighborhoods (Dunleith, Oakmont, and Rosegate) were the first, if not the only, residential subdivisions where Black people were allowed to purchase homes in New Castle County.

The participants selected for this oral history project have firsthand experience living in residential subdivisions along the New Castle Avenue corridor—most of the participants were children during this time. The majority of the participants lived in these communities prior to the establishment of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which ended de jure (legal) housing segregation. The mixture of informants from eight neighborhoods along the New Castle Avenue corridor was intentionally chosen to represent a variety of backgrounds and perspectives of the lived experiences during the 1940s, '50s, '60s, '70s, and '80s. This was to ensure that a larger perspective was gained about this time period, which would in turn better inform the accompanying historic context.

In order to achieve the most diverse group of oral history participants, contact was made with several civic association presidents and other community leaders for the neighborhoods along the Route 9 corridor, specifically in Oakmont, Simonds Gardens, Rosegate, Rose Hill Gardens, Dunleith, and Collins Park. Longtime residents were also contacted for neighborhoods such as Rizzo Avenue, Holloway Terrace, Southbridge, Castle Hills, and Buttonwood. These early conversations helped establish contacts in these communities and facilitated connections with potential participants for this oral history project. Relationships were also established with helpful staff at the Route 9 Library & Innovation Center, which offered its facilities for oral history interviews or other study-related meetings. The library also offered to be a repository for the materials produced by this project.

Between January 2022 and June 2023, with the help of civic association presidents and other longtime residents, CHAD staff established contact with dozens of potential interviewees for the oral history project. News of this project was spread by word-of-mouth, email blasts, neighborhood newsletters, and social media postings. Several

dozen names were gathered, prioritizing residents who lived in the neighborhoods during their earliest decades, especially between the 1950s and the 1970s. Dozens of phone calls were made to establish contact with the most promising candidates for the oral histories, though many prospects ultimately did not participate due to COVID safety concerns and protocols, challenges with utilizing online software for “virtual” interviews, scheduling conflicts, health problems, privacy concerns, and other unknown reasons. Some potential interviewees reported that they had lived in the subject neighborhoods after the “historical” period most under study for this project and thus could not shed light on the early decades. Ultimately, 18 community members participated in formal, recorded oral histories, hailing primarily from eight neighborhoods—including Buttonwood, Castle Hills, Dunleith, Holloway Terrace, Oakmont, Rizzo Avenue, Rosegate, and Rose Hill Gardens. However, some interviewees had lived in multiple neighborhoods, and nearly all of them shared memories and perspectives about many neighborhoods in the corridor, providing valuable information about developments beyond their own “home” neighborhoods.

Informants for this oral history project include Allee Watson, resident of Rosegate; Crystal Taylor, resident of Rose Hill Gardens; Bobby Benjamin, former resident of Rosegate; Brenda Timmon-Gunter, resident of Rose Hill Gardens; Charles Watts, former resident of Castle Hills; Sandra Smithers, resident of Dunleith; Sondonia Parker, resident of Oakmont; Marc Rizzo, resident of Rizzo Avenue; Anthony (Tony) Rizzo, former resident of Rizzo Avenue; Ben Rizzo, former resident of Rizzo Avenue; John Ridgeway, former resident of Dunleith; Edythe Pridgen, former resident of Dunleith; Barbara Pinkett Hicks, former resident of Buttonwood; Joseph Pinkett, former resident of Buttonwood; Gilbert Pinkett, former resident of Buttonwood; Reginald Davis, former nearby resident to Buttonwood; Gerald Collins, resident of Holloway Terrace; and Octavia Penny Dryden, former resident of Rosegate. A synopsis of each interview is included in an abstract for each informant in Section 1.6.

The questions asked for this oral history project focused on four sub-themes—demographics and community, quality of life, racial dynamics, and experience of architecture. Below is a summary of the focus of each sub-theme.

Demographics & Community

Questions on this sub-theme will seek to uncover the demographic character of each community, both perceived and real, based on factors including age, family status, professions and livelihoods of residents, levels of homeownership versus leasing, social dynamics, and overall sense of community.

Quality of life

Several of the questions aim to uncover quality-of-life as perceived by residents in the corridor over time, by investigating many factors that sometimes overlap with other themes. These include investigating environmental factors, such as neighborhood proximity to non-residential land uses; access to transportation, schools, churches, and commercial establishments; perceptions of crime and personal safety; appearance and upkeep of homes and community spaces; and sense of community among neighbors.

Racial dynamics

Though *de jure* housing segregation ended in Delaware and the United States in 1968, this study hopes to shed light on the persistence of *de facto* segregation in the greater Wilmington housing landscape and how residents in the corridor perceived various spaces and their racial dimensions.

Experience of Architecture

Interviews will focus in part on the impressions and experiences of residents and former residents of the architectural dynamics of their homes and neighborhoods, including the size, quality, layouts, and alterations made to their homes and any changing dynamics to the subdivisions and their amenities.

The information gathered through this oral history project informed the historic context, “Development of Residential Subdivisions along the Route 9/New Castle Avenue Corridor, 1945-1970 +/-.”

1.4 Methods

Oral history interviews were conducted using protocols and techniques established by the Oral History Association (OHA). These techniques and protocols include recording and video standards, transcription standards, proper archiving techniques, and participant interview methods. CHAD staff asked each participant a standard set of questions related to the key topics and terms, with some questions specifically tailored to each informant (see Appendix A). As with any oral history, these questions served as a starting point to obtain useful information but allowed participants room to elaborate on their experiences and recollections.

Oral history projects of this type have been excluded from the need for formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval by the University of Delaware since the 2019 revisions to the Department of Health and Human Services “Policy of Protection for Human Research Subjects.”¹ However, each informant was required to sign a consent form after the interview had concluded. All interviews were conducted with the highest professional and ethical standards, as spelled out by the Oral History Association’s *Principles and Best Practices*.²

Due to the current global health crisis (COVID-19), the initial oral histories were conducted remotely over the teleconference platform Zoom. In the spring of 2020, two professional organizations—the Oral History Association and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region—released updated best practices and guidelines for conducting remote oral histories, and these were incorporated into the methodologies for this project. To achieve best archival standards and offer flexibility for future use, two sets of recordings (visual and audio) were created during each interview.

As COVID restrictions eased throughout the duration of this project, many oral history interviews were conducted in-person, often at the Route 9 Library & Innovation Center. The oral histories were all recorded through Zoom, whether in-person or remote, as this platform produces both video and audio recordings.

¹ [The Electronic Code of Federal Regulations](#) Part 46 – Protection of Human Subjects, Subpart A – Basic HHS Policy for Protection of Human Subjects, §46.102 Definitions for purposes of this policy. € (7) (1) deems oral history to be excluded from the definition of research.

² [Oral History Association Principles and Best Practices](#), adopted October 2018; [Oral History Association Remote Interviewing Resources](#), adopted 2020.

1.5 Results and Key Findings

As a collection, the oral histories conducted for this project provided many valuable insights into the lived experiences, social dynamics, architecture, and cultural geography of the neighborhoods along Route 9 over the course of approximately eight decades—while focusing especially on the 1950s, 1960, and 1970s. The 18 interviewees—both Black and white, and of varying ages—shared extensive memories of their time living in the neighborhoods of Dunleith, Rosegate, Rose Hill Gardens, Oakmont, Rizzo Avenue, Holloway Terrace, Castle Hills, and Buttonwood. Some informants shared their experiences in raising a family in one of the housing developments, while others who grew up in one or more of the neighborhoods reflected on their parents’ experiences while sharing their own memories of childhood within the communities. Most of the interviewees provided observations on changes over time in their neighborhoods. Examined collectively, several strong themes emerged in these dialogues, many of them linked. Overwhelmingly, respondents expressed that a strong sense of community, safety, and security pervaded their neighborhoods; many recalled a strong sense of pride in homeownership and suburban living; interviewees remembered strong migration from the American South & the draw of employment in Delaware; and relatedly, many remembered a high level of occupational diversity within their neighborhoods. Schools and churches were recalled as key community focal points for several neighborhoods, and many remembered childhood recreation as mostly informal and inventive. Respondents shared diverse experiences involving race, ethnicity, segregation, and integration. Respondents also identified things in their neighborhoods that changed over time—how people adapted and customized their homes, and many of the informants felt they had witnessed significant neighborhood change, decline, and loss.

Strong Sense of Community, Safety, and Security

The most prominent theme to emerge in the interviews was the strong sense of community—and the related sense of safety, security, and mutual support—that existed within the subject neighborhoods. All interviewees expressed this sentiment in some way. Those who grew up or raised families in the Black neighborhoods of Dunleith, Oakmont, Rose Hill Gardens, Rosegate, and Buttonwood repeatedly expressed a strong sense of connection, mutual reliance among neighbors, and feelings of safety and security within their development.

Respondents from Dunleith, especially, reflected on the tight-knit nature of the community, its family-like atmosphere, a culture of mutual support, and a strong sense of connectedness. Regarding the physical size of the neighborhood, Sandra Smithers pointed out, “Yes, it was a big development, but the Black community was

small—so people were connected.” John Ridgeway also recalled a “definite sense of connection” in the neighborhood back then. Both Edythe Pridgen and Smithers highlighted the sense of security that pervaded the community, with Smithers calling Dunleith a “safe haven,” since “whatever was going on outside in the world, you knew if you got to Dunleith you were safe...you had that sense of security.” Pridgen also recalled enjoying a feeling of freedom while growing up in Dunleith—including the “freedom to grow, freedom to express yourself...It was a good time and a great feeling, because you really had community and unity out there.” The sense of security was strong enough that people did not worry about crime, said Smithers, who shared that “people slept with their doors open. You know, just the screen door because there was no air conditioning. Windows open, screen door...the key under the front door mat where any and everybody could find it” because there was “virtually no crime” at that time. She added that Dunleith “was a great community to grow up in and to raise a kid in.” Neighbors shared commodities big and small with each other: “Neighbors borrowed from each other, too, ...[a] cup of sugar, that sort of thing,” and people did not hesitate to ask a neighbor for a ride somewhere if needed. “There was nothing shameful about borrowing from people,” recalled Pridgen, and in fact, “it was the norm.” Even with all of the changes and loss in the intervening years, many of the bonds formed by residents in these subdivisions in the early years have remained intact. As Pridgen described, “we still have that comradery...and it didn’t matter what age group you were, you’re just, you’re always happy to see someone from Dunleith.”

The idea of a shared culture of support, especially related to community parenting, was recalled by several participants, many of whom were children during the post-war period. Reflecting on her childhood in Dunleith, Edythe Pridgen said, “The adults were very involved with the kids in the neighborhood,” teaching them softball, yard games, tight rope walking, and generally watching out for other children as if their own. In addition, she noted that “mostly all kids—the one thing was nice, when you came home, your parents were there, or a parent was there or like across the street.” Neighbors watched out for each other’s children in Dunleith, and conversely, children were taught to respect their elders in the neighborhood. Ridgeway especially emphasized this culture in Dunleith, describing the development as “a family” and remembering several important mentors to him in the neighborhood. “You had role models,” he recalled, “and I can’t emphasize that enough, you had a *lot* of role models. You had a lot of people there that wanted to make sure you did the right thing.” Even after he went to college, he remembered neighbors encouraging him to finish strong and having pride in his future success: “There was a lot of people who used to say, ‘You need to graduate,’” and “that type of encouragement kept you focused.” This sense of community parenting was, for Ridgeway, epitomized by a memory he had from a Little League baseball game: “I still remember, I call him Mr. Watson. He was on the sidelines, we were playing a team, he was

saying—young man was batting—his son was Duvall Watson on the team—another young kid was batting, he said—called him ‘my son.’ ‘My other son’s up to bat now!’ You know, it was that type of family.” As a child in Rosegate, Octavia “Penny” Dryden recalled how neighborhood adults looked after all of the kids and that “the babysitters could be anybody.” She remembered, “If I went around the street and I did something that I wasn’t supposed to do, a call would get to my mother before I got back to the house.” Crystal Taylor of Rose Hill Gardens described her childhood that was fairly contained inside of her neighborhood outside of school hours, with yard games and chats on porches. She also recalled that parents did not hesitate to correct the behavior of neighborhood kids, and when kids misbehaved away from home, “when you got home, your parents would also know. And if somebody [an adult] told you to do something, you did it.”

When asked to share their favorite things about Rose Hill Gardens while growing up, Crystal Taylor tellingly responded “my neighbors,” while Brenda Timmon-Gunter responded that it “was how we all knew each other.” In Rosegate, Penny Dryden remembered how anywhere that you went in the community “you knew people. It was very communal there—safe, you felt safe,” and “People protected each other.” In the Oakmont subdivision, Soderia Parker emphasized this same sense of neighborliness, mutual connection, and reliance, noting, “I used to tell everyone I would move from Oakmont if I could take my neighbors with me,” and “We looked out for one another, we took care of one another.” She illustrated the mutual trust neighbors shared by recalling a neighbor who offered to let her borrow a brand-new car: after Parker asked for a ride to the store, the neighbor said she was running late for work but told Parker, “The keys are on the table there.... Take the car.” Parker reported a similar sense of safety and security in Oakmont that people felt in Dunleith, indicating that one of her favorite things about the neighborhood was that “at one time, we didn’t even know where a key was to our house because nobody locked their houses. We have gone to Louisiana and rem[embered] we didn’t lock the doors and things. We have opened the doors and the windows, and it would be hot...or sleep with the screen doors, just the screen doors open and things, and you felt safe. You never even worried, never thought—never gave a thought to nobody harming you or anything. Wasn’t...even a fleeting thought that any harm would come to you in that area.” Growing up in Castle Hills, Charles Watts similarly remarked on this sense of security, noting, “We always had good community,” and “you didn’t have to lock your doors.” Gerald Pinkett and Barbara Hicks described the Buttonwood neighborhood as a “close-knit community” composed of “close-knit families” when they were growing up there in the 1930s into the early 1950s.

The sense of security and trust extended to local commerce, as well, according to a few of the interviewees. Local store owners were also known to allow purchases on credit when customers did not have the money immediately or when residents in surrounding communities fell on hard times, suggesting a strong level of both inter- and intra-community trust. Edythe Pridgen remembered that one of her neighbors within Dunleith ran a store from the utility room in her home and recalled, “That was my first charge account because I would go over there faithfully, and she would let us, you know, have some things, and we’d come back, take our soda bottles to the store, get the cash, the little pennies, and go back and pay her.” Crystal Taylor reported that the owners of a store near Rose Hill Gardens, Sam and Esther, had “a ledger so if people needed something, they would be able to get it, you know, until they got money.” Charles Watts of Castle Hills similarly remembered many residents shopping across New Castle Avenue at George’s store [George Pennington] because, while there was an ACME and an A&P, “George was cheaper. It was a smaller store...and, like I said, he would give you credit,” and “people like my dad, we was on welfare, end of the month if he needed to get some bread and milk, you know, George would give him, give him a little credit, and then he’d pay him when he got a check.”

Pride in Homeownership / Newer Suburban Homes

All interviewees indicated, in some way, that their families felt a strong sense of pride in homeownership and in suburban living. Owner occupancy rates were very high in the Route 9 corridor’s subdivisions during their earliest decades, and very few informants recalled rental properties in their neighborhoods during the early years of most subdivisions. Overwhelmingly, interviewees recalled having a positive experience of the architecture and amenities in their subdivisions, particularly as many had moved from the more cramped quarters located within the public housing developments at Millside or Southbridge, or from older housing stock in East or South Wilmington.

In Dunleith, Sandra Smithers recalled that her parents, who were original purchasers in Dunleith, used to go to the construction site on Sundays in 1951 to watch in anticipation as their house was being built on Robinson Drive. Edythe Pridgen recalled about her parents and other Dunleith homeowners, “I think it gave them self-confidence, pride, and people really had a lot of pride in their homes. You would see them even washing down, you know, the cement, doing lawns. My father would come home . . . and he’d always water the grass in the summertime at night,” and it was common for neighbors to keep their lawns neat. Interviewees from Dunleith also noted that an additional point of pride for owners there was knowing that all the streets in their neighborhood were named after prominent African Americans. In recalling the architecture in Dunleith, Pridgen, whose family

lived in a small, three-room unit in Millside before purchasing in Dunleith, remembers especially “the *room*” offered by their new home there. Upon move in, “I just kept running around the house until my father came out and told me to stop running around. I was excited. And then we had a bathtub in there, and I called my sister and brother, and the three of us just stood in the bathtub because we, in Millside, we used the galvanized things you used to wash your clothes in and that was the shower, and the water would run down there and then you’d have to dump it outside. So, it was really amazing for me.”

Rose Hill Gardens residents also had a high degree of pride in homeownership and felt their neighborhood enjoyed a good reputation. Brenda Timmon-Gunter, who lived there between 1962 and 1976 (from ages 4 to 18), believes purchasing in Rose Hill Gardens was a significant move for her parents. While both of her parents’ families in Louisiana had owned their own properties, for her parents in Delaware, “It was a really big deal because it was the first thing that they ever bought,” and “I think it felt like they had really come a long way.” She believes her parents, who had rented in the nearby Millside development before purchasing in Rose Hill Gardens, were glad to be “putting their family in a better environment.”³ Similarly, Crystal Taylor, whose parents purchased in Rose Hill Gardens a couple of years before she was born in 1962, believes their home there must have been a significant step up from their previous home. She recalls that her parents had previously lived in public housing at Southbridge or Millside, likely in a one-bedroom unit, so “to have a bigger house, with three bedrooms, it was much more conducive” to comfortably accommodating their growing family.⁴

Residents from other subdivisions recalled a similar sense of pride among their families after purchasing homes in the New Castle Avenue corridor. Penny Dryden from Rosegate, remembering her parents’ townhouse purchase there, recalled “how proud they were about owning their own home,” which they felt would provide stability and give their kids a safe place to grow up. Dryden described being “excited” when moving into Rosegate because “it was just beautiful. These were all brand new homes, and when you walk in it was just so spacious. You could see from the front door through the kitchen, and it had a nice slider. We weren’t used to sliding doors, you know, so that was a brand-new feature. And everything’s brand new. And, like I said, the hardwood floors were shiny and clean.” Dryden reflected on how she and her siblings would often help maintain their yard “to keep everything

³ Brenda Timmon-Gunter, interview by Michael J. Emmons, Jr., March 24, 2022, interview recording and notes, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware. Timmon-Gunter returned in 2017 to care for her mother.

⁴ Crystal Taylor, interview by Michael J. Emmons, Jr., February 11, 2022, interview recording and notes, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware. Taylor has lived in Rose Hill Gardens for nearly her entire life, except a four-year period when she lived in North Carolina.

nice” because of the pride her parents took in their home. Similarly, in Oakmont, Sondonia Parker noted that “if somebody saw somebody’s yard was really ragged and everything, they would ask you if you want them to help...people would go around and, you know, sweep up and keep everything—try to keep everything nice.” In Castle Hills, Charles Watts remembered that, especially when moving from Southbridge, his parents’ new home in Castle Hills seemed “beautiful”—it “was like the Garden of Eden,” especially the “big back yard and a garden.”

In the single-street Rizzo Avenue subdivision, all but one of the houses were built by the family’s patriarch, Joseph Rizzo, Sr., and his children, so their pride of ownership also extended into pride of design and craftsmanship—as well as their grandfather’s pride in recreating the village atmosphere he had left behind in Italy. The Rizzos recalled that their grandfather, Joe Sr., had “left a situation like this from Italy,” and having left a tight-knit community in his native country, “he loved the fact that he was able to do the same thing here.”

Migration from the American South & the Draw of Employment

In addition to drawing new residents from Wilmington, the public housing at nearby Millside or Southbridge, or elsewhere in Delaware, the housing developments in the Route 9 corridor attracted many buyers from the American South. Many of the Black interviewees and their neighbors had ties to the American South, having come to live along Route 9 either directly from the South or via Wilmington, Detroit, or other northern cities. The long-established Buttonwood community was, perhaps, an outlier in having very few residents from further afield than southern Delaware. Interviewees from the Buttonwood neighborhood could not remember any neighbors who had relocated from the South, recalling only one family who had moved up from southern Delaware. Instead, they felt that most Buttonwood families had been established there since the early twentieth century.

Sandra Smithers explained that her family purchased a house in Dunleith after being forced to leave their home in Wilmington’s East Side neighborhood because properties there were seized under eminent domain “under the guise of urban renewal” for Poplar Street Project A. However, her family had originally moved to Wilmington from Mount Dora, Florida, from which Smithers’ father had fled to escape an almost-certain lynching following an argument with his white boss. She recalled that several families relocating from the South stayed briefly with them in their home while establishing jobs and housing in Delaware. Edythe Pridgen, too, explained how her parents had relocated from North Carolina to Millside—with a brief stop in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on the way—before ultimately moving to Dunleith. John Ridgeway recalled a neighbor that had moved from Detroit to continue working for Chrysler in Newark.

Allee Watson of Rosegate, who had himself moved from a rural part of Kent County, Delaware, recalled that many of Rosegate's residents during the 1960s and '70s had moved there from southern states like Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia because job opportunities were plentiful in northern Delaware. He also recalled a neighbor who moved from Detroit for Chrysler. On the availability of jobs in Wilmington, Mr. Watson shared his dad's old saying: "If you couldn't find a job in Wilmington, Delaware, you couldn't find a job anywhere." Penny Dryden's family had moved from across the Delaware Memorial Bridge in Salem, New Jersey, where they worked at Anchor Hocking Glass but had originally relocated from North Carolina only a few years before. They had heard about Rosegate and its affordability from family members living in Millside. Rosegate's proximity to the Memorial Bridge made it even more attractive: Dryden recalls, "You could look out the back window of...the back bedroom in our Rosegate home and see the Delaware Memorial Bridge." Bobby Benjamin, too, had moved to Rosegate from Virginia.

Oakmont also provided homes for residents relocating from the South. Louisiana natives Sondonia Parker and her husband, after first following pipeline work from Texas to Oklahoma, purchased a home in Oakmont to be closer to her ailing father-in-law, who was living in Hamilton Park, having himself relocated from Louisiana to Delaware for work. Parker recalled other neighbors in Oakmont who originally hailed from southern states.

Among white interviewees, Charles Watts' family had moved from Southbridge to Castle Hills when he was four years old. He recalled that most of the people in Castle Hills were from Wilmington, from Maryland (especially the Elkton area), and "a lot of people from West Virginia." He recalled how the families from West Virginia lived in a specific section of the subdivision that took on a particularly country feel: "There was, like, one part of Castle Hills that I remember, we used to call them 'Castle Hillbillies' because it was a lot of people from Virginia, West Virginia. You know, and the other half was more people from—that had migrated from Wilmington, and it was just like two cultures within one development."

Occupational Diversity

Several interviewees in the Route 9 subdivisions described a wide diversity of professions and jobs held by residents within their neighborhoods. In the Black neighborhoods, teachers, doctors, lawyers, and politicians lived alongside custodians, painters, bricklayers, store owners, and hospital workers, forming what informants considered generally middle-class neighborhoods. In the Black neighborhoods, many attributed this occupational

diversity to housing segregation and the lack of other housing options available to those with enough money to purchase a home.

Edythe Pridgen points out that Dunleith included “all walks of life” because, owing to housing segregation, “There was nowhere else for them to go.” Interviewees remember a dentist, a doctor, teachers, domestic workers, executives, business owners, barbers, hairdressers, carpenters, plumbers, contractors, school employees, church employees, police officers, union representatives, factory workers, bricklayers, postal workers, lawyers, cleaners, laundresses, longshoreman, and many who worked in the automotive industry, including plant managers. Companies represented were DuPont, Chrysler, GM, the Pullman Company, and many others. Pridgen remembers, in general, that the people of Dunleith were “hard workers,” and Ridgeway emphasizes that the neighborhood was “very diverse in talent” with lots of “successful people—people that had jobs of authority, jobs of substance, jobs of quality.” Several interviewees recall that most of the local teachers lived in Dunleith or close by, and Smithers remembers that “we walked to school as our teachers were walking to school.”

Rosegate interviewees remembered residents doing well financially and that they were employed as schoolteachers, steelworkers, or at companies like DuPont, General Motors, Chrysler, Anchor Hocking Glass, and West Virginia Pulp and Paper. In Castle Hills, Charles Watts remembered his neighbors working for DuPont, GM, Chrysler, Nemours, and in the construction of the Delaware Memorial Bridge, further recalling that “back then, the women were starting to get more into the workforce. So, a lot of ladies were going to work for DuPonts.”

Schools and Churches as Community Focal Points

Many respondents described schools and churches as centers of their communities, providing not only education and spiritual enrichment but also opportunities to socialize. For example, at Buttonwood, Barbara Hicks identified the schoolhouse and the neighborhood church as centers of their community—and those two institutions featured among their best memories of their neighborhood.

At Dunleith, a pair of local churches and the school served as important focal points of the community. Most families either attended Coleman Memorial Methodist Church on Anderson Drive or Community Presbyterian Church on Rogers Road—both of which everyone walked to.⁵ Besides spiritual fellowship and “booming Sunday

⁵ Pridgen and Smithers both shared that these churches were originally hosted in neighborhood homes, with Coleman starting with the Jenkins family at a house on Bethune Drive, and Community Presbyterian starting at Millside School and then 465 Morehouse Drive,

schools,” both churches also hosted social activities.⁶ Sandra Smithers recalled that a dance was held at Community Presbyterian Church every Saturday night from 7-10 pm, and Edythe Pridgen remembered a girls club, the Boy Scouts, and bowling parties and teams organized by the church. She also remembered Coleman Memorial Methodist Church organized big trips to the skating rink off Governor Printz Boulevard. The local school also was a hub of the community—first Millside School and later Dunleith School—since they were open until 5 pm and hosted afterschool programs. The schools also had dances, and their playgrounds, ball courts, and baseball field were areas for kids to congregate and play outside of school hours.⁷ Many recalled living side-by-side with their teachers, who helped keep them on track educationally. Ridgeway indicated, “In fact, some of the teachers at Dunleith School, when it first started, a lot of them lived right in Dunleith. So, it wasn’t uncommon to see your teacher, who kept you in line.”

Sodonia Parker noted that for residents of Oakmont, the schools were a major focal point of the community and brought Dunleith and Oakmont closer together socially: “Schools were the one thing in the ‘60s, up until they integrated them... Black kids went to Dunleith, and so we knew all the school. We knew the teachers, the teachers lived in the neighborhood, the principals, and what have you. We went to church with them, so the kids knew they better behave because we might see them in the store.” Church, too, represented a social focus, where “Reverend Moyer at Community Presbyterian, he always had something going on for families and children” in order to “keep them occupied.”

Schools and churches were also central to other neighborhoods and their social dynamics. Charles Watts described Castle Hills Elementary School as a real anchor of the community because they had summer programs, the May Fair, and the neighborhood’s baseball diamond—where, besides baseball leagues, community leaders “would have functions down there, too, besides baseball,” like block parties. Jerry Collins of Holloway Terrace recalled that community news was typically spread at a pair of local churches that many residents belonged to—the First Baptist Church and Holy Spirit.

where Reverend Moyer removed a bedroom in order to host his congregation. Pridgen recalls they broke ground on the new Community Presbyterian on Rogers Road in 1954 and laid the cornerstone in 1955.

⁶ Sandra Smithers, interview by Michael J. Emmons, Jr., April 19, 2022, interview recording and notes, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware.

⁷ John Ridgeway, interview by Michael J. Emmons, Jr., June 4, 2022, interview recording and notes, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware.

Childhood Recreation as Mostly Informal and Inventive

Another key finding was that, for kids growing up in the Route 9 neighborhoods in the 1950s through the 1970s, play and recreation was often informal and inventive. Sports and games often involved creative, makeshift locations and equipment. Sandra Smithers remembered that in Dunleith, “There were no fences at that time, so we would play softball in the backyards with a stick and a ball, and we would use two or three yards for the field, and we broke lots of windows.” Softball games were also played in an informal ballfield between Dunleith and Garfield Park, according to Edythe Pridgen. There was also a homemade basketball court behind Morehouse Drive. John Ridgeway recalled, “We were creative in our recreation... We built our own skateboards, built our own go-karts, we would do our own sledding down the hills in Oakmont and Dunleith... we would slide down the hill on boxes,” whether they had sleds or not. Penny Dryden explained how a cul-de-sac at the end of Thorn Lane in Rosegate became a makeshift park, track, and sports field where kids would play marbles, hopscotch, football, dodgeball, and baseball, and “on the outside of that circle where the roads were, that was our track. We turned that into a track field. I mean for bike races, foot races we would run around that circle.”

For several interviewees, various natural features, as well as old buildings and landscape elements, provided places to explore and engage in often adventurous recreational opportunities—especially at ponds, woods, railroad tracks, and even abandoned mansions. For example, Edythe Pridgen remembers her brother and his neighborhood friends swimming in a pond behind their Dunleith home.⁸ John Ridgeway remembered that “right behind Dunleith School was a heavily wooded area with ponds that we’d go fish for minnows, and you’d see all sorts of wildlife.” Near Castle Hills, Charles Watts remembered a pond situated in Rogers Woods, behind the nineteenth century Boothurst Mansion where “Mrs. Rogers” lived: “There was a little pond back there, and she would charge you ten cents—like if you want to go ice skating, you had to go up and pay, sign a book, and give her a dime.” Watts also described playing in Rogers Woods, which surrounded Boothurst and held sand pits, where kids would ride bikes, play army, and eat packed lunches. He further recalled that he and his Castle Hills friends would walk the nearby railroad tracks.⁹ Near Buttonwood, Joseph Pinkett, Jr., remembered going to swim in makeshift ponds formed by rain-flooded foundation holes at Castle Hills during construction of that development in the early 1950s. A draw for children in the Dunleith neighborhood was exploring the nearby

⁸ Edythe Pridgen also recalled white residents of the adjacent Garfield Park neighborhood claiming the pond as theirs and attempting to prohibit its enjoyment by the Black residents of Dunleith.

⁹ These railroad tracks have now been converted to official recreation space as part of the 5.5-mile Markell Trail connecting the New Castle to Wilmington.

abandoned Dunleith Mansion (the namesake for the housing development—the site of which is within the present-day Oakmont subdivision. Pridgen remembered that there was a chandelier inside the mansion, and that the neighborhood children “used to jump from the steps and swing on it.” On Rizzo Avenue, Anthony Rizzo recalled that the Rizzo children considered the collective backyards of their families as their playground—as well as the nearby construction yard, where “we actually had fun.”

Closer to home, many participants also described porches and backyards as the everyday focal points of play. Crystal Taylor stated that her next-door neighbor’s front porch was central to her childhood experience. She and her friends would gather there, straying sometimes to the driveway to play games. Overall, though, “the porch was it. Everybody that knew Rose Hill Gardens, they knew we would be up on that porch.”

Regarding formal parks, interviewees spoke fondly of officially designated parks in or near their subdivisions but reflected on how most were built or upgraded with playground equipment or basketball courts too late for them to enjoy as children, or even for their children to enjoy. For example, in Dunleith, it was not until the interviewees were adults that Surratte Park and its ballfields and swimming pool were installed. Sodonia Parker noted that when her kids were young, they would play in an empty field; the park in the middle of Oakmont was not developed with basketball courts and playground equipment until her children were grown. Yet, for occasional adventures further afield from home, several interviewees described Battery Park in Old New Castle as a recreational focal point. Charles Watts reflected on bike rides with friends to Battery Park for fishing in the Delaware River (and a picnic) as “a big excursion,” while Marc Rizzo remembered riding to Old New Castle where he and his siblings, cousins, and friends “used to go fishing....we’d disappear.” Longtime resident of Rosegate Allee Watson also recalled fishing at Battery Park (similarly, Buttonwood residents remembered fishing in the Delaware River on occasion but noted it was not straightforward to get to the river from their neighborhood). Anthony Rizzo indicated that the Rizzo kids would sometimes spend time at Holloway Terrace Park, since residents of the neighborhood often invited them to neighborhood picnics and events.

A formal, organized recreational activity that was prominent in many interviews involved organized sports leagues. In fact, sports were a major recreational activity for many in these neighborhoods, whether formally organized or not. Several interviewees recalled ballfields serving as community magnets. John Ridgeway described how the entire community would show up to the Little League fields behind Dunleith School to support the neighborhood’s organized baseball teams, explaining that when “we played Little League baseball, the whole

community was at the games.” He also described how Little League games helped to more closely bind the neighborhoods of Dunleith and the adjacent Rose Hill Gardens. Charles Watts also remembered the Little League fields on Moores Lane serving as the center of the Castle Hills community, noting that the neighborhood started with a single baseball team but eventually created two or three teams due to the popularity of Little League in the neighborhood. Buttonwood residents, too, identified the ballfield behind the Buttonwood School where the Buttonwood Tigers baseball team met as a central part of the neighborhood’s recreational life.

Other formal recreational activities involved organized trips to venues outside of the neighborhoods. Most of the interviewees who grew up in the Route 9 subdivisions had memories of trips to skating rinks, the Bowlerama, or swimming pools at the YMCA, Eden Park, Price’s Run Park, or the Wilmington Swim Club. Edythe Pridgen remembered church-organized trips from Dunleith to a segregated roller-skating rink off of Governor Printz Boulevard, and John Ridgeway remembered an occasional trip to a skating rink in Chester, Pennsylvania. Oakmont resident Sodonia Parker remembered taking her children to the roller rink in Elsmere on the weekends, in addition to trips to the movies. Marc Rizzo identified the Bowlerama as a hang out spot for his family and friends.

Experiences of Race, Ethnicity, Segregation, & Integration

Most interviewees recalled a large degree of racial homogeneity within their subdivisions along Route 9 during the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond, due to both formal and *de facto* housing segregation. As such, racial antagonism was not a constant presence in the everyday lives of many of the oral history participants. However, several Black participants recalled experiencing racism intermittently and/or in subtle ways, with occasional dramatic incidents looming large in the minds of many. White interviewees of Italian descent also recall ethnic slurs aimed at them or their families during the same era. Unsurprisingly, tensions based on race or ethnicity seemed to flare up in spaces that were outside the comfort of home neighborhoods—in schools, libraries, or other areas that were integrated or where unplanned interaction occurred between different groups. Tension and racial antagonism also occurred during transitional periods in some study neighborhoods as they integrated in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Many Black interviewees experienced racism more episodically when walking through white neighborhoods or when they encountered nearby white residents. In fact, several Black interviewees recalled specific neighborhoods they avoided due to racial antagonism, most notably Collins Park and Holloway Terrace. When asked about any neighborhoods he might have avoided as a child, John Ridgeway recalled of Collins Park and Holloway Terrace,

“It was just like one of these...I don’t want to say unwritten code, just unwritten thought process. You just didn’t go down there.” Sondonia Parker of Oakmont, when asked a similar question, named Collins Park, Holloway Terrace, and Dobbinsville (a small subdivision southwest of the City of New Castle). Crystal Taylor, of Rose Hill Gardens, also stated that Collins Park felt unwelcoming to Blacks, and Allee Watson of Rosegate noted that the residents of Collins Park “didn’t even want a Black garbage collector.” More than one Black interviewee remembered experiencing taunts, threats, or racial epithets when they had to walk through predominantly white neighborhoods to get to school or a bus stop or enter for other reasons. For example, Edythe Pridgen described being called “a dark cloud” by other children while walking to the Wilson family’s store in Holloway Terrace, although she did not recall that neighborhood being particularly antagonistic to Black people. She also recalled that a pond adjacent to both Dunleith and Garfield Park, where her brother and his friends would swim, became a source of racial tension when “white teenagers came down and said they couldn’t swim in that pond,” leading to even adults “arguing across the pond to one another,” though her brother and his friends continued swimming in the pond afterwards. Much later, she recalled that while canvassing for a county councilor in Minquadales in 1985, white people threw bricks at their van “and told us to get out of there and called us all kinds of names, and we got out of there as fast as we could.” Sandra Smithers recalled walking from Dunleith through Rose Hill Gardens as a child in the 1950s (when Rose Hill Gardens was still a white neighborhood) to catch the Route 9 bus and experiencing harassment, being called names by adults: “I mean, we’re kids, and they were telling [us] to ‘get out of our community, you little [racial slur redacted],’ and this and that and the other.” Charles Watts, who grew up in Castle Hills, remembers the Little League baseball teams were racially segregated by neighborhood, with the Black teams representing Simonds Gardens, Rose Hill Gardens, and Dunleith, and the white teams (for the New Castle Hundred league) representing Castle Hills, Jefferson Farms, Collins Park, and Manor Park. When his father was coaching the older kids on a Babe Ruth team, he recruited Black players from nearby neighborhoods, which Watts remembered causing “a big stink” among coaches of the other white teams.

Several white informants recalled that ethnic harassment was also aimed at families of Italian or Eastern European descent. Charles Watts said ethnic slurs were often leveled at his Italian American mother, recalling, “My mom went through a lot with people calling her a [racial slur redacted], you know, [racial slur redacted] and all that stuff the kids say.” Interviewees from the Rizzo family also shared their grandfather’s experiences with ethnic slurs and poor treatment as an immigrant from Italy. When discussing his grandfather’s motivations for shedding some of his Italian identity, Ben Rizzo remembered that he would say “they were treated worse than the Black man because he was an Italian, and he’ll tell you they called you [racial slur redacted], [racial slur redacted]. Just

basically like some of the Mexicans are going through right now, you know, because they're from another country." Charles Watts also remembered slurs directed at Polish Americans living in Castle Hills. He recalls, "Back then, there was a lot of racism.... But it was, back then, it was just the way it was, you know. You call—this family was a bunch of [racial slur redacted] and, you know, some of that stuff you couldn't say today because it just wouldn't fly, you know what I mean?"

Integrated schools and other educational institutions were also a source of racial discord and discrimination during the early years, often between students but sometimes from staff members. When Edythe Pridgen was moved to the newly integrated De La Warr High School, she recalls that she "didn't like De La Warr High School" because of "the teachers and administrators." She adds, "I had a good time with us, the classmates, the integration was excellent," but with teachers and coaches, "we had to be ten times better and...they were prejudiced." As such, she "enjoyed segregation much better than I did integration at school, especially at De La Warr." Crystal Taylor, as one of eight Black students who attended Delcastle High School in the 1970s, indicated that she felt racial tension from her first day at the school—after having always gone to school with white students with no incident before. At Delcastle, the eight Black students would sit and eat lunch together each day, and one day, a white student had put a paper sign on their table that said, "this table's for [racial slur redacted]. And we were like, what?" In another instance, students on the prom committee insisted that there should be two bands to play the dance because some whites voiced opposition to the use of the word "ain't" in some popular songs of the time. As a result, Crystal Taylor recalls, we had a "Black band and a white band, which I thought was crazy. I'm like, 'Why don't you get one band that plays all music?' So, they would alternate the Black music then the white music. But it was... to me, it was silly." Sandra Smithers related her experience working as a teacher for Head Start at the formerly all-Black Dunleith School in the mid to late 1960s, noting that while the pre-kindergarten program was fully integrated, white parents did not want their children to stay at Dunleith School for grade school. She recalls, "When it was time for white kids to come to Dunleith School—the school, first grade—they were, like, 'oh, no, no,' they could never send their kids there." Sondonia Parker remembered taking her children from Oakmont to the easily accessed public library in New Castle, where she would encounter suspicion due to her race while browsing books. She indicated that library staff "would stand over you almost while you [browsed] the books...and whatever books you had, like you were going to eat them, or make them disappear...like touching them was going to make them disintegrate, you know, that kind of thing."

Several more dramatic moments of racial strife seem to stand out in many of the interviewees' memories. Almost universally, the oral history participants spoke of the racial bombings at Collins Park in 1959 as a key moment in the corridor's racial history, whether or not they were actually old enough to remember it occurring. While all interviewees were aware of the infamous Collins Park bombings, another perhaps lesser-known story of dramatic racial harassment did emerge during the interviews. Allee Watson of Rosegate remembered a Black friend who was one of the first to move his family into nearby Simonds Gardens, which had started as a white neighborhood, where a cross was burned in his friend's yard and racist literature was scattered around it (a period newspaper article confirming this incident was later located during our research). Sandra Smithers of Dunleith also referenced this same racially motivated confrontation in her interview, as well, recalling, "I understand in some of the other communities, as people started to integrate, crosses were burned on their lawns and things like that."

Several interviewees also remembered tension during the period of racial unrest in the late 1960s, which erupted in many American cities, including Wilmington, and was caused, in-part, by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. For example, John Ridgeway of Dunleith remembered, "When the riots took place in 1969, I can remember vividly when we got the National Guard" showing up near the "Oakmont store" on Rogers Road, which was "a center of where everyone used to connect." He recalled that "the National Guard came and lined up in front of the store without no reason," and that "the FBI came, and they parked their car, I think it was the FBI group, and no one would say who they were. They were just sitting out in the parking lot observing," which created "a lot of...tension and unrest." Edythe Pridgen, also of Dunleith, related that during the 1968 racial protests in Wilmington, the New Castle County's Department of Parks and Recreation offered grants to local organizations to keep kids "in their own neighborhoods and safe." As a young adult at the time, she was hired by her church's pastor to organize outings for Dunleith kids, which included a county-funded excursion to a roller skating rink near Elkton, Maryland. However, after arriving at the skating rink, "When they saw we were African Americans, they told us [there was] no way that we were going to come in there." When a skating rink worker called the police, Pridgen directed the bus to leave, and "as we were going up the road . . . we just saw—[it] looked like a parade of state troopers coming down to that area." Octavia "Penny" Dryden, of Rosegate, remembers that "after the Martin Luther King assassination," during the late 1960s and early 1970s, "at school there would be fights," and that "there was a lot of racial tension everywhere." The interviewees from the Rizzo family, who were grade school children at the time, remember "racial tension" after the "segregation riots"—and recalled seeing schoolyard fights that seemed to be motivated by race. Attending the Catholic school, Holy Spirit School, they witnessed large fights between Black and white students, some of whom attended the De La Warr

High School next door. Watching from a bus, Anthony Rizzo remembered, “When they would come out from De La Warr, they’d have all their belts and chains. They’d be fighting in...the playground of Holy Spirit.”

Change Over Time: Adapting and Customizing Homes

Despite widespread pride in homeownership, especially during the early years of the Route 9 housing developments, some interviewees, when prompted, shared observations about deficiencies in the architecture of the houses or amenities of their neighborhoods—and often, how these challenges were addressed over time through adaptation and alteration.

In several of the neighborhoods, construction and design flaws, modest amounts of living space, or house layouts could sometimes cause inconveniences. At Dunleith, the houses’ concrete slab foundations and masonry construction, combined with the configuration of the heating systems, caused some issues over the years. Edythe Pridgen recalls of the heating system that “when it would turn off, and there was a cycle, [and] if you looked down in the vent, water was running through the houses. It never got up inside the house, but a lot of the houses got a lot of mildew or mold.” Sandra Smithers similarly recalls moisture and mildew issues, pointing out frequent “moisture on the floors because of condensation, because the houses were [on] slab,” and some houses were also built on formerly “marshy land.” This was made worse by floors laid with tile, since “the floors were cold, and the heat came from the ceilings, and there was no way to heat the floors.” She recalls people’s shoes would sometimes develop mildew from sitting on these floors, and “there were a number of people who had to leave Dunleith because of the moisture.” In Oakmont, Sondonia Parker indicated that circulation in her home was not ideal—and that, in particular, access to her basement was not as straightforward as she would have preferred due to her split-level layout, since to get to the basement level to do laundry, you had to go “all the way through your living room and then around, down steps, and then down the [additional] steps into the basement.” At Rosegate, Allee Watson, who had relocated from rural Kent County, felt somewhat cramped or boxed-in in his small rowhouse, so he extended his living space outdoors—turning to gardening in his backyard to help him initially settle in, a practice which he has continued at his Rosegate home since 1962. Also at Rosegate, Penny Dryden said she always disliked having only one bathroom in her rowhome growing up, particularly because she was part of a family of seven.

Renovations were common in all of the mid-twentieth century neighborhoods with modestly sized homes along the Route 9 corridor. People described the ways in which their families or neighbors improved their homes,

especially by upgrading kitchen and bathroom spaces, and purchasing new appliances. Sandra Smithers remembered the ways in which people expanded their homes in Dunleith by adding new kitchens, bedrooms, or dens (especially to the rear). While large-scale additions were not common in Rosegate, Penny Dryden recalled that several people did renovate their kitchens and bathrooms and quickly replaced appliances, the quality of which “was not the best.” Dryden also recalled that the space for a clothes washer and dryer—appliances that did not come with the home—was quite cramped. While her family purchased these appliances, she remembered many people in Rosegate using the laundromat. Charles Watts’ family also upgraded the kitchen in their Castle Hills home, recalling that their family was one of the first people to build an addition in the neighborhood.

Another common home improvement was the addition of porches. Charles Watts’ father built “a patio out front with one of them old green awnings,” which became a social gathering point for his mother and her friends as well as a point of pride for the Watts family. Sondonia Parker’s husband added a porch at the back of their Oakmont home; however, they did not use it much, in part because socialization tended to happen at the front of the houses. John Ridgeway recalled that front and back porch additions were also common in Dunleith, stating, “Some of the families expanded their homes by putting a porch.”

Neighborhood Change/Decline/Loss

The theme of neighborhood change, decline, and loss came up among many of the participants who were interviewed for this project. Loss came in several forms: chiefly, people lamented the loss of community cohesiveness their neighborhoods had fostered in their youths and young adulthoods. Barbara Hicks, Gerald Pinkett, Joseph Pinkett, Jr., and Reginald Davis recalled that during their childhoods in Buttonwood in the 1930s, 1940s, and into the 1950s, the neighborhood was “a little country place” without defined blocks, where people “had gardens, they had pigs.” Barbara Hicks said, “Everybody knew everybody back then.” Today, Buttonwood interviewees said that “less than half” of the old houses remain in the neighborhood, having been heavily renovated over the years or replaced with newer builds. Hicks, who currently lives in the neighborhood, said that it was filled with newcomers, and “I know maybe about 20 percent of the people.” Buttonwood interviewees said that changes in their neighborhood began, in part, because many of the kids went off to college and did not return to the neighborhood. John Ridgeway of Dunleith noted a similar loss of cohesion and attributed this change to original owners selling their homes and moving out of the neighborhood. “We had second and third level homeowners,” and the “new families moved in didn’t have the sense of connection that we had growing up.” He

further stated when the second or third generation homeowners moved into the neighborhood, it ended a culture of everyone knowing everyone.

Most participants identified this loss coinciding with a decline in home ownership and increase in rental properties in their neighborhoods. When asked about the biggest change to her neighborhood of Oakmont since she and her husband bought their home in 1967, Sondonia Parker noted that people “buying houses and then subletting them [out] to people...that have no vested interest in the community” changed her neighborhood a great deal. Brenda Timmon-Gunter, who is the president of the Rose Hill Gardens Civic Association, also noted that there are now “a lot of rental proptert[ies]” in her neighborhood. Allee Watson remarked on this shift from predominantly owner-occupied houses to rental properties in his neighborhood of Rosegate, which he has lived in since 1963. Penny Dryden recalled that the fences between front and back yards marked a transition point in Rosegate. These only started going in in the 1990s, with the transition “from ownership to, to renters, people kind of, you know, wanted to protect theirs, and that’s when all of the chain link fencing and all that came in.” She said everyone became more private and that “you felt the change happening.” Bobby Benjamin placed the shift from more owners to renters in Rosegate in the 1990s, as well. Sandra Smithers, when asked to comment on if the homeownership rates in Dunleith had changed over the years, responded that it had “significantly changed recently,” and that Dunleith, which was historically 100 percent owner-occupied, now had rental rates as high as “30 percent.” While the Rizzo family continues to operate the family masonry business on Rizzo Avenue, only a handful of current residents in the small subdivision are family. Ben, Marc, and Anthony Rizzo noted that many of the previously family-occupied houses are now rented, and some have even been subdivided into apartments.

Following integration, the move out of neighborhood schools and the community these had engendered represented a heavy loss for many Black interviewees. That loss was conveyed as both physical, as residents watched the demolition of many of their school buildings, and psychological, as what had been major community focal points ceased to exist. Several noted that the schools they attended as children no longer existed. Among them, Crystal Taylor of Rose Hill Gardens indicated, “All of our community schools are gone . . . first through fourth was at Rose Hill Elementary, which is now the Rose Hill Community Center. Dunleith School was fifth and sixth grade, and it is now an industrial park.” Some noted the physical demolition of these buildings. Relatedly, many of the informal spots for exploration that participants recalled from their childhoods have also disappeared, replaced with newer subdivisions or industrial parks. In Castle Hills, Charles Watts recalled that the

Boothurst Mansion was used “for the fire company to practice on. But anyway, after [the last owner] moved, that farmland is what now is an industrial park.”

In the past twenty years or so, Penny Dryden of Rosegate spearheaded efforts to shed light on the hazardous environmental conditions to the health of those living along Route 9, collaborating with other neighborhoods to bring about awareness and change. Adjacent to chemical plants, heavy industry, railroads, and roads heavily trafficked by large trucks, “the residents did not know [about the detrimental effects], and so they were exposed to this over years, and a lot of them lost their life from it.”

1.6 Abstracts of Interviews

(Abstracts are included alphabetically by subdivision, then by informant's last name)

BUTTONWOOD

Barbara Hicks, Joseph Pinkett, Jr., Gilbert Pinkett, Reginald Davis

Current and/or Historical Residents of Buttonwood (and Adjacent Areas)

Route 9 Oral History Project

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

Interview Date: June 12, 2022

Abstract

Barbara Hicks lived in Buttonwood from her birth in 1933 until 1953, when she moved to the Southbridge neighborhood. She returned to live in Buttonwood in 2006 and lives there currently. Joseph Pinkett, Jr., was born in Buttonwood in 1934 and left the neighborhood in 1951 to join the Air Force. Gilbert Pinkett lived in Buttonwood from his birth in 1946 until 1965. Hicks and the Pinketts are siblings. Reginald Davis's grandparents bought a home along Route 9 in walking distance from but just outside of Buttonwood, which the interviewees note is bounded by Buttonwood, Lincoln, Railroad, and Arbutus Avenues. Davis lived with his grandparents and attended Buttonwood School beginning in second grade, moving away as an adult. He lives close by the neighborhood today. He was present for the first approximately 15 minutes of the interview. In this interview, participants discuss life in the small, Black neighborhood in the middle decades of the twentieth century and describe how it has changed through the years.

The interviewees describe how the neighborhood of their childhood was a small community composed primarily of approximately 30 to 35 mostly large, close-knit African American families, with many children who grew up to go onto college. They also characterize the Buttonwood community as close-knit. The Pinketts' parents—who rented their home in Buttonwood before buying it—and other residents had come from Wilmington and other parts of New Castle County, and they recall another family coming from southern Delaware. Residents worked in foundries, steel mills, at General Motors, and in the industrial area near the river. Many people relied on buses and had to go into downtown Wilmington for goods. Joseph Pinkett describes the neighborhood of their youth as “a little country place.” Barbara Hicks says residents had gardens and some kept pigs. Houses were small, they say, well-spaced, and arranged linearly. Indoor plumbing arrived only in 1948 or 1949, before which the community relied on wells and outhouses. The streets were paved and streetlights installed in the 1950s, after the Pinketts' father, a local activist and politician who served as delegate to the National Republican Convention, advocated for these improvements. Further advocacy brought additional services, like street snow plowing.

The respondents list families in residence in the neighborhood during their childhoods and identify George Pennington's general store on the corner of Arbutus Avenue and Route 9, the Buttonwood School, and the church—an older church and then its replacement built in 1947, where the interview takes place—as centers of their community.

Children in the neighborhood went to the Buttonwood School through eighth grade and went to Colonial School District for high school after desegregation. Some went to Booker T. Washington and Howard High. The kids in the neighborhood were engaged in Little League baseball as the “Buttonwood Tigers” at the Buttonwood School's ballfield. The interviewees remember playing sandlot football and engaging in Boy Scouts, which met at the school.

The Pinketts describe housing in their area as segregated and remember the open fields they would play in before the subdivisions were built. Gerald Pinkett had friends in Castle Hills and remembered being harassed in the neighborhood in about 1960 but continued to go see his friends. They note that Collins Park was not a place they felt welcome and recall kids from the development harassing them across the fence from the ballfields at Buttonwood School.

Over time, many of the houses in Buttonwood have been either heavily remodeled or replaced with newer builds. They describe a neighborhood with very few remaining old time residents and with fewer than half of the original houses. Current Buttonwood resident Barbara Hicks says she knows only about 20 percent of residents there now. Many of the old time residents return weekly for church services. The area nearby was developed for industry in the mid-twentieth century, but interviewees recall that the industry-related traffic worsened in the 1980s, prompting activism to erect a fence to keep the traffic from traversing the neighborhood.

CASTLE HILLS

Charles Watts**Former Castle Hills Resident****Route 9 Oral History Project**

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

Interview Date: March 30, 2022

Abstract

Charles Watts lived in Castle Hills from 1958 until 1970 or 1971, when he left to join the Air Force. His parents purchased a new home in the development and moved their family of nine there from Southbridge when he was four years old. Watts has lived along the Route 9/New Castle Avenue corridor for most of his life. In addition to Castle Hills and Southbridge, he has lived in Collins Park and Mobile Home Village. He is a current resident of Swanwyck Estates.

In this interview, Charles Watts recalls growing up in Castle Hills, characterizing the subdivision as a big step up in house and yard, neighborhood, and education from their small Southbridge rowhouse with its tiny back yard. During his childhood years, Watts remembers Castle Hills having a “Leave It to Beaver” feeling. He describes the sense of community he felt there, how people took care of their property, how kids played outside, and how people watched over each other’s kids. The physical and social focal points of the community were Castle Hills Elementary School and the baseball field at James Rogers Park, with a playground and regular dances held at the former and neighborhood events as well as Little League and Babe Ruth baseball games held at the latter. Neighborhood kids would also congregate to play in Rogers Woods, where, among other activities, they would pay Mrs. Rogers 10 cents to ice skate in the pond behind her home, Boothhurst Mansion. Watts and other neighborhood children would also ride their bikes along the railroad tracks, sometimes venturing to Battery Park in Old New Castle, where they would eat a picnic lunch. As Watts grew into his teenage years, he recalls the formation of gangs in many of the neighborhoods that would often fight with each other. Watts was a member of Castle Hills’ gang, Roxeter, which had a junior counterpart, Little Roxeter. He describes some racial unrest in the later 1960s.

Watts describes Castle Hills as an almost entirely white neighborhood and included several families of Polish or Italian heritage. Many residents had moved to Castle Hills from Wilmington as well as Maryland—especially the

Elkton area—and West Virginia. Watts recalls that many of those from West Virginia lived in the northwest section of the neighborhood (encircled by Midfield Road), which had a more country feel to it. Other residents referred to the residents of that section of the neighborhood as “Castle Hillbillies.” He remembers that many of Castle Hills’ residents held jobs at General Motors, Chrysler, and DuPont, or in the construction of the Delaware Memorial Bridge. The homes, which he describes as “starter homes,” attracted many younger families. The schools in the area were fed by predominantly white neighborhoods and a few very small Black neighborhoods. He recalls that the neighborhood remained white while he lived there and for quite a while after he left. Referring to the Route 9 neighborhoods, he characterizes as white “anything south of the overpass,” with the exception of the Buttonwood neighborhood. Now, he says, all the area neighborhoods are integrated. There was some distinction in the makeup of the Route 9 neighborhoods: Swanwyck, Watts says, was the more “elite neighborhood” when he was growing up, while Collins Park was “redneck-ish.”

Architecturally, Watts recalls that the houses were fairly uniform throughout the entire development, with no major variations in the size or design of the houses. Almost all were built on concrete slab foundations, though a small section of the neighborhood—on Roxeter Road and Chelwynne Road—had full basements. The houses had sizeable attics that most people utilized for storage. Watts’ father built a large kitchen addition on their house, which helped accommodate their large family, and Watts remembers that many other families seemed to build kitchen additions shortly afterwards. The neighborhood mostly had carports, with few people building garages, though his father extended the driveway further into the backyard to make more space. Watts remembers playing basketball there with his brother. His father also built a large patio with a big, green awning, and he remembers his mother gathering there with neighborhood women in the evenings.

Towards the end of the interview, Watts describes his residency in Mobile Home Village in the mid 1980s, calling it “a rough stay there.” He also briefly recalls the Baldton neighborhood (within the corporate limits of New Castle) south of Castle Hills.

DUNLEITH

Edythe Pridgen**Former Dunleith Resident****Route 9 Oral History Project**

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

Interview Date: June 9, 2022

Abstract

Edythe Pridgen is a former Wilmington City Councilor whose family moved from Millside to Dunleith in 1952, when she was four years old. Pridgen lived in Dunleith until 1972 and currently resides in Bear, Delaware, with her granddaughter. In this interview, Pridgen recalls growing up in Dunleith, describes the close-knit community there, discusses the racial dynamics in the area in the 1960s and '70s, and remarks on ways in which the community and characteristics of the architecture have changed through the years.

Transplants from North Carolina, Edythe's parents had lived in Millside since 1944. She describes Millside's cramped accommodations and layout of space and also the strong sense of community residents of Millside shared. Although Dunleith was open to Black military veterans when built and her father had been unable to serve, her Army veteran uncle signed the paperwork for the house for her family. She describes how excited she was about her family's new home in Dunleith, how large the house seemed, and how impressed she was by the bathtub. What impressed her most, she remembers, is how many kids there were to play with in the neighborhood. Pridgen says her parents and neighbors were proud of owning their Dunleith homes and remembers her father and her neighbors taking meticulous care of their lawns.

She describes the Dunleith community as close-knit and very safe, recalling playing with neighborhood children in the streets and fields as a child and picking fruit in a part of the neighborhood before it was developed. Pridgen describes how the schools had many activities for kids to participate in, and that the two local churches—Community Presbyterian and Coleman United Methodist—held regular dances and other events and activities. The adults, she says, were very involved with the children in Dunleith, and many teachers from the local Dunleith School and Millside School lived in the neighborhood. She remembers that the adults in her neighborhood were employed in a wide range of jobs because there were few other options for homeownership for African Americans in the area. In addition to teachers, people were employed as dentists, business executives, plumbers, carpenters,

hairdressers, laundresses, and in the auto industry at the nearby Chrysler and General Motors plants, among others. There were also many small business owners. Many families had connections to the South, Pridgen recalls, while some had relocated from Detroit, and many had lived in Southbridge, Millside, or elsewhere in Wilmington before purchasing in Dunleith.

Pridgen notes that her family had very few complaints about their home in Dunleith, although she remembers that the subdivision's placement on marshland caused dampness, mold, and foundation problems in many of the houses. She recalled that only four houses in Dunleith were built with basements and that these were all on Bunche Boulevard. In her own home, she recalls seeing water running through the heating ducts below the floor vents. She remembers some families enlarging kitchens, adding an extra bedroom or second story, or adding a porch. Alterations to the subdivision included the extension of Morehouse Road to connect it to Route 9.

She relates several experiences with racial animosity in some of the white neighborhoods along Route 9, recalling receiving taunts from children while walking through Holloway Terrace to the small store that was located there during her childhood and her brother and his friends receiving harassment from white teenagers from Garfield Park for swimming in a pond between the two neighborhoods. She attended the segregated Millside School and Dunleith School for elementary through ninth grade and relates how the transition to the integrated De La Warr High School was marked by a great deal of racism from the school's staff. The students, she says, generally got along fine. Pridgen also relates her memories of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., of racial unrest in Wilmington in the late 1960s, and of protests at the Delaware State House during her years as a college student at Delaware State University. She recalls being chased out of Minquadale in the 1980s while canvassing for a local candidate.

Pridgen notes that the neighborhood has seen changes through the years, beginning most notably in the 1990s, when she began to see more drugs in the neighborhood. While she believes it remains predominantly African American, she says that within the past decade or so she has seen more Latino and Asian residents move into the neighborhood. She says many younger people and couples have moved in recently and spent time beautifying the neighborhood. The biggest change she remarks on is the greatly increased property values in the neighborhood, where houses that sold for \$7,000 initially now sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Pridgen concludes the interview restating what a positive experience she had growing up in Dunleith.

John Ridgeway**Former Dunleith Resident****Route 9 Oral History Project**

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

Interview Date: June 4, 2022

Abstract

Born in Dunleith in 1953, John Ridgeway spent his entire childhood and the early part of his adult life in the neighborhood, moving away when he got married in 1978. He currently lives in Landenberg, Pennsylvania. In this interview, Ridgeway recalls growing up in Dunleith, describes the architecture of the neighborhood, describes the close-knit nature of the community and diversity of occupation there, comments on the racial dynamics in the area in the 1960s and 1970s, describes recreational opportunities, and remarks on some ways in which the community has changed through the years.

John Ridgeway's parents were originally from Alabama and had moved to Wilmington—where his father's aunt lived—after his father served in the Army. Before Dunleith, his parents had rented in Millside, which they always remembered fondly. They were drawn to Dunleith because of the availability of financing for veterans and because it represented a unique opportunity for suburban homeownership in the Wilmington area for people of color. Ridgeway's parents purchased a new, three-bedroom home in Dunleith in 1952 in a part of the development near the entrance from Rogers Road. He recalls that his parents were early owners in the development, lists the family names of some of the earliest owners there, and remembers that the lots and homes in that part of Dunleith were larger than those in later parts of the development. He indicates that while the home models and appearance there are consistent with those in later-developed parts of the neighborhood, they hold more square footage even if they would be considered small by today's standards. He recalls that about 85 percent of residents owned their homes, and there were very few renters in Dunleith when he was growing up. He had no complaints about his Dunleith home and remembers some families adding a garage or a front or back porch to their homes or building extra rooms. He recalls a family adding a basement to their home, noting that a handful of the earlier houses in Dunleith were built with basements.

Ridgeway describes the neighborhood as a family that “embraced each other and enjoyed life day to day and supported each other,” and that outside of the neighborhood, “It was either Dunleith or everyone else.” He recalls a great deal of adult involvement and community parenting and says, “If I did something bad in Dunleith, no matter where I was at in the community, you can bet my mom would hear about it.” He explains how much pride there was in the community, that there was a shared sense of values there, and that it was a fun and supportive place to grow up where he made lifetime relationships. He also describes Rose Hill Gardens and Oakmont as social extensions of the Dunleith community and notes that he did not go into neighborhoods like Collins Park or Holloway Terrace except to play Little League.

Ridgeway recalls that many of his neighbors had southern roots, while many had moved from elsewhere in Wilmington, others had followed the Chrysler plant from Detroit, and another family had originated in Massachusetts. Ridgeway notes that his neighbors were “very diverse in talent” and held a variety of occupations he describes as “jobs of authority, jobs of substance, jobs of quality.” His father was a union carpenter, and he recalls a neighbor who was also a carpenter. There were bricklayers, contractors, postal service workers, teachers, lawyers, accountants, auto industry workers, and managers.

Ridgeway explains that neighborhood children went to Dunleith Elementary School but were bussed to the integrated Colwyck Junior High for seventh through ninth grades, with different grades attending school for different shifts of the day. He then attended De La Warr High School. Ridgeway recalls that racial incidents at the integrated schools were episodic and were not a day-to-day occurrence but notes that the segregated nature of the neighborhoods contributed to racial issues in the schools. He also describes experiencing racial profiling from the National Guard and FBI in the majority Black neighborhoods along Route 9 during the Wilmington riots in 1968-1969.

Ridgeway recalls that the grounds of the local schools were open for recreation after the school day and that a pair of churches in the neighborhood, Coleman United Methodist and Community Presbyterian, also arranged recreational activities for Dunleith children and youth, such as Friday night dances. Ridgeway speaks most fondly of Little League baseball games in the ballfields behind Dunleith School, recalling how the entire neighborhood would come to support the community teams. Community news traveled through these institutions. He was 13 or 14 years old when Surratte Park was built, which became a community recreation focal point. He also recalls

bowling at the Bowlerama and swimming at the Wilmington Swim Club. He describes how the neighborhood kids would make their own skateboards and go-karts.

Ridgeway has seen Dunleith change gradually as the older families moved out and newer families moved in. He feels the sense of connection he experienced as a young person does not exist to a similar degree now. He also believes that there is greater ethnic diversity in the neighborhood today. Ridgeway remarks on the segregated nature of most of the neighborhoods along Route 9 when he was growing up and notes that today there is much more racial diversity in what were once all-white neighborhoods.

Sandra Smithers**Current and Historical Dunleith Resident****Route 9 Oral History Project**

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

Interview Date: April 19, 2022

Abstract

Sandra Smithers grew up in Dunleith and is a longtime and current resident of the development. Her parents were the first owners of their Dunleith home and watched its construction in 1951. Smithers was six years old when her family moved to Dunleith from their small home on Poplar Street in Wilmington’s East Side neighborhood. She lived in her parents’ house on Robinson Drive until she left for college in 1962. She returned and purchased her own home on Bethune Drive in 1978, where she currently lives. Her sister still lives in their family home on Robinson Drive.

Smithers recalls that her family was forced to leave their East Side home at 806 Poplar Street in Wilmington because properties there were seized under eminent domain “under the guise of urban renewal.” She characterizes the community on the East Side of Wilmington as “a Black Wall Street” that was filled with Black-owned businesses and residents of varying socio-economic statuses before the neighborhood fell casualty to the Poplar Street Project A. Her own family had moved to Wilmington from Mount Dora, Florida: Smithers’ father fled first to escape almost-certain lynching following an argument with his white boss. While Smithers had learned this story as a child, it was confirmed to her only a few years back from another community member with Florida ties. Smithers remembers how people moving up from the South would seek out others from their town who had come before them, recalling how her parents hosted for short-term stays several people relocating from Florida. She recalls that having a new home was meaningful to her parents. The main complaints she indicates her neighbors had with their houses was that they were poorly insulated and that some had moisture coming through the floors because they were built on slab foundations on marshy land.

Dunleith residents were all Black, Smithers notes, because there were no opportunities to move to many other communities in the first decade or so after Dunleith was built. She cites the Rayfields’ move into Collins Park in 1959—and the subsequent bombing of their home—as a very early attempt to integrate previously white

neighborhoods. She says, “Everything was white with the exception of Dunleith. Oakmont had not been built. So we were just in Dunleith. And then there was Millside.”

In the beginning, Smithers recalls, all the homes in Dunleith were owner-occupied. In her recollection, most owners were young families with children. Most of the fathers were World War II veterans, since the development was built for these men on their return from the war. Dunleith residents, Smithers indicates, were a mix of professional and blue-collar workers. Smithers remembers that many of the teachers from the Dunleith and Millside schools lived in the neighborhood and that they would walk to school just as the children did. Smithers remembers how having teachers in the neighborhood meant there was a great deal of support for students and very little truancy. She also remembers a policeman, a dentist, a union man, and at least one small business owner in Dunleith. She recalls families who followed Chrysler from Detroit. Her own father worked at the Pullman Company. Many of the women living in Dunleith did “day work” cleaning or housekeeping in the homes of people in other (white) neighborhoods.

The Dunleith School, which held grades kindergarten through nine, was a focal point of the community. She remembers afterschool basketball games attended by parents, teachers, and preachers, along with school fashion shows and May Day celebrations. Many kids stayed after for supervised recreation. The two neighborhood churches, Coleman Memorial Methodist and Community Presbyterian, also played a central role in the social life of the Dunleith community. The latter hosted dances every Saturday evening. Smithers also recalls a shopping center on Rogers Road with Black-owned businesses that included a supermarket, a “canteen”, and a dry cleaner. She describes how Surratte Park, established while she was away from Dunleith, came to be a focal point for community recreation.

While Smithers was growing up, many people were without cars and either walked or used public transportation to get around. This opened the way, she recalls, for kids to play safely in the subdivision’s streets, where they rode pushcarts and skated, among other things. Residents had to walk to Rogers Road or Route 9 to pick up the bus until Morehouse Drive was opened up to Route 9, after which the buses came into the neighborhood. Smithers also remembers the racial slurs residents of Rose Hill Gardens—all white at the time—would call her and the other children passing through that neighborhood to access the bus on Route 9. She recalls white to Black hostility but little direct violence in her area.

Smithers characterizes Dunleith as a very close-knit community, describing it as “*the safe haven,*” where people felt happy and protected from the tumult and violence of the outside world, giving as an example her memory of the murder of Emmett Till. She states her belief that the neighborhood dynamic changed significantly following housing desegregation after 1968 and what she refers to as a “drug dump” into Black communities following the Vietnam War. Elaborating, she describes seeing many young men return from Vietnam traumatized and turning to drugs to cope. Prior to this, she says, Dunleith had been a place with almost no crime where people slept with their doors and windows open to cool their non-air conditioned houses. By the late 1960s, she said there were overdose deaths and crime also rose.

HOLLOWAY TERRACE

Jerry Collins

Current and Historical Holloway Terrace Resident

Route 9 Oral History Project

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

Interview Date: October 14, 2022

Abstract

Jerry Collins is a current and historical resident of Holloway Terrace, a community along the Route 9/New Castle Avenue corridor. Having previously lived in the City of Wilmington, Collins and his wife moved into their current home in 1966, where they lived happily across the street from his wife's parents for many years. Having lived there for nearly 67 years, Collins offers some perspective on the changing demographics, visual layout, and social and community attitudes in Holloway Terrace. To date, Collins remains an active member of the Holloway Terrace Civic Association, providing insight into the industrial developments in the Port of Wilmington and its impact on the local communities.

In this interview, Jerry Collins recalls life in Holloway Terrace from the 1960s to the present day. He remarks on the transition from owner-occupied homes to the increased presence of rental properties in the neighborhood, the pressures of development, the upkeep and maintenance of the subdivision, and the growing concerns regarding increased truck traffic and industrial development along Route 9.

Jerry Collins describes the general demographic of Holloway Terrace as a “generational thing,” wherein predominantly white families raised their children who, later in life, would move back in and/or acquire their family homes. The Collins family purchased their home from its former owners, the Leonis, as a small, single-story home. Over the years, Collins has nearly “doubled” the home’s square footage, as have many of his neighbors through additions and expansions. Collins describes his and his wife’s feelings of pride in owning and tending to their home, especially their flower gardens surrounding the property. According to Collins, the neighborhood has become increasingly desirable for new development and, consequently, has seen a major increase in house size and price over the years. Collins discusses how very few homes in the neighborhood reflect their original, ranch-type construction.

Although there was no formal community center, Collins recalls that the residents of Holloway Terrace largely stayed in contact through word-of-mouth communication at the local corner stores and the community churches, First Baptist and Holy Spirit. Children in the neighborhood were free to play outside safely, and many participated in Little League baseball as Collins remembers. Largely owner-occupied, change in Holloway Terrace had been minimal up until the arrival of prospective developers. In fact, one of the largest changes to the neighborhood that Collins recalled was the building of a park on 11th Street and East Avenue in Holloway Terrace sometime in the mid 1990s. Presently, the neighborhood is a more diverse community of owners and renters from varied socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds.

Describing recreational opportunities for children and adults in Holloway Terrace, Collins indicates that there “wasn’t very much to do.” He recalls that many residents had access to transportation, decentralizing the need for entertainment in Holloway Terrace. Many families enjoyed the luxury of owning at least one car, and public transportation was readily accessible. Neighborhood children attended one of several local schools, including the McCullough School, Saint Peter’s, Saint Mary’s, and Rose Hill School, expanding local social circles beyond the immediate residents. Collins describes that, as with many places, his feelings towards Holloway Terrace have fluctuated over time. Despite a home break-in in the mid 1990s, battles for the neighborhood’s upkeep, and the need to work with the county to improve local safety, Collins believes that the neighborhood is in a period of general improvement.

In the final 10 minutes of the interview, Collins discusses environmental concerns from the residents of Holloway Terrace. He cites a “slight leak” from the Borden Chemical Manufacturing Company, illegal dumping of waste off of Interstate 495, the recycling plant in the Port of Wilmington, and truck traffic through residential areas as the biggest threats to public health for communities along the Route 9 corridor.

OAKMONT

Sodonia Parker**Current and Historical Oakmont Resident****Route 9 Oral History Project**

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

Interview Date: May 25, 2022

Abstract

Sodonia Parker, a retired corrections officer, purchased her Oakmont home in 1967 and moved there with her husband and four children. She has lived in the same home there since that time, staying through the years to provide a family anchor point and, additionally, because it provides a good home base from which to travel the world. Her four children grew up in the Oakmont home, and some of her grandchildren and great grandchildren have also resided there throughout the years. In this interview, Parker recalls moving to Oakmont and raising her four children there in the 1960s and 1970s. She describes the close-knit community there and how much her neighbors meant to her, talks about architectural amenities of the homes in Oakmont, discusses recreation, schools, and the racial dynamics in the area in the 1960s and 1970s, and remarks on ways in which the community has changed through the years.

Transplants from Louisiana, Parker and her husband James—who passed away in 2022—had followed his job laying oil pipelines to Oklahoma. They had stopped through Delaware on their way back to Louisiana to visit Parker’s recently injured father-in-law, who was living in Hamilton Park at the time. When they decided to stay in Delaware to aid in his recovery, they were attracted to Oakmont because of the space, quality, parking, and overall value it offered the large family. She remembers being impressed even when looking through the window and seeing how spacious the rooms looked, and, with its multiple levels of living, double closets in the master bedroom, as well as its unfinished basement, the rowhouse generally seemed very roomy and represented a large contrast from the homes she was accustomed to in Louisiana. The Parkers purchased one of Oakmont’s end units, which allowed them to adopt the adjacent communal open space as a side yard, which offered extra play space for the family’s four children. Her husband, James, finished the basement space, which was quickly adopted by son Jimmy as his bedroom.

Parker had very few complaints about the architecture of her home but did make a few alterations over time. At one point, the family desired additional outdoor space for congregating, so they built a back porch on their unit. Eventually, they discontinued using it because their yard looked straight across to the back of Dunleith and also because much of the social action in the community took place at the front of the house facing the street. Though some Oakmont units had laundry rooms on the main living level, hers was located in the basement. As the Parkers aged, this became more inconvenient to access, so they eventually installed a stackable washer and dryer upstairs. The Parkers also recently updated their kitchen.

Parker explains that it was the neighbors and community that made Oakmont a special home for the Parkers. She recalls that several of her neighbors had relocated from the South and had a variety of different jobs, including medical and technical professionals, teachers, employees of DuPont, Chrysler, and General Motors, among others. Residents enjoyed each other's company and would gather outside in the communal spaces for conversation or barbecues. Parker describes how community members all watched over each other's children as they played in the neighborhood, and kids frequently gathered at the Parkers' household, even staying for dinner sometimes. In general, it was a tight-knit community with close networks of friendship and mutual support, where Parker remembers, "We looked out for one another," and how residents would "sleep with the screen doors open . . . and you felt safe. You never gave a thought to nobody harming you or anything—[it] wasn't even a fleeting thought that any harm would come to you in that area." Neighbors, she says, would help each other when they needed it. She recalls that the civic association took care of many of the community's maintenance needs until the city stepped in to take over many of these duties after neighbors began speaking out at county council meetings.

Children in her neighborhood went to Dunleith School, Parker remembers. Her oldest daughter went to De La Warr High School, but her other three attended William Penn in the mid to late 1970s. For recreation, the kids played baseball, and Community Presbyterian Church held many activities for them. Parker also recalls a summer camp put on by the State Police that neighborhood children attended. In addition, the Parkers would take their kids roller skating and to the movies. She also indicates that the families would host each other's kids for dancing and entertainment.

Parker recalls some of the racism she and her family encountered in Wilmington and along the Route 9 corridor, particularly in the late 1960s and 1970s. She describes how the family encountered racism from potential neighbors in Wilmington while house hunting in the late 1960s prior to purchasing in Oakmont, and how, when

her children were young, her family was treated with suspicion from staff when they visited the public library in New Castle. Parker's job as a Head Start recruiter throughout the 1970s brought her into some of the majority white neighborhoods along Route 9, where she recalls a racially charged exchange in Collins Park. She also recalls that Holloway Terrace had a racially antagonistic atmosphere.

Parker notes some changes to the neighborhood over the years. While her children and their neighborhood friends often played in the side yard adjacent to their house, Parker notes how impressed she is with the amenities of the park in the center of the neighborhood that went in later, including how well the city maintains it. She says that today the neighborhood lacks the same neighborly quality it once had and that she no longer knows most of her neighbors. She notes, too, that many of the properties have been purchased as rentals in recent decades. The demographic composition of the neighborhood is different from the early days, too: while the neighborhood was almost entirely Black when her family moved there, today she says there are more white and Hispanic residents.

RIZZO AVENUE

Marc Rizzo, Anthony Rizzo, and Benjamin Rizzo**Current and Former Rizzo Avenue Residents****Route 9 Oral History Project**

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

Interview Date: June 3, 2022

Abstract

Cousins Marc Rizzo, Anthony (Tony) Rizzo, and Benjamin Rizzo all participate in this oral history interview. The interview was conducted at the office of Joseph Rizzo and Sons Construction, the Rizzo family's masonry business on Rizzo Avenue, a small subdivision along the Route 9 corridor built by the family's patriarch, Joseph Rizzo. Marc and Anthony Rizzo were present for the entirety of the oral history interview; Benjamin Rizzo participated for about 30 minutes of the interview. All three grew up on Rizzo Avenue, the family's subdivision. Marc Rizzo left in 1994 and then returned to live there in 2019. Anthony moved away in 1992 but returns to the subdivision each day for work. Benjamin Rizzo grew up in the subdivision and is the owner of Diamond State Masonry. They are the third generation of their family to live in the subdivision and were all born in the early 1960s. In this interview, the three men recall growing up on Rizzo Avenue and share stories and memories from their own as well as their parents' and grandparents' generations.

Marc and Tony recall that their grandfather, Joe Rizzo, Sr., who had immigrated from Italy earlier in the twentieth century, purchased a large parcel along Route 9 and moved from Poplar Street in Wilmington to the brick farmhouse there in 1930. He worked in construction and between 1942 and 1948 established his bricklaying and construction business. The family's matriarch and patriarch had eight children—four daughters and four sons. In 1949, they subdivided Rizzo Avenue into roughly equal parcels and then set about building housing for this second generation as they came of age. The cousins speculate that the bulk of the building was undertaken in the mid 1950s, and they list which family members lived in which houses. In time, the family built warehouses for the business and also a pool and recreation room, which became a focal point for socializing. A wine cellar built in the 1950s also became a social hub in the 1970s. In building the family subdivision, according to Marc and Tony, Joe Sr. hoped to recreate the family village he had left behind in Italy. All of the second generation worked in the family business, although some left to establish their own businesses.

They indicate that everyone got along and that their generation “all lived around each other, we grew up brothers, cousins, and best friends. It was fun for us.” The men remember that the construction yard was their playground and that they would rest and have snacks at each other’s houses. Recreation outside the subdivision included trips to the Bowlerama and Holloway Terrace Park and activities at St. Anthony’s church. The cousins remember invitations to Holloway Terrace picnics and events and indicate that they had friends in Collins Park. They also remember riding their bikes into Old New Castle and spending the day at Battery Park fishing.

The cousins recall that the second generation of Rizzos attended Rose Hill School and that most went to Brown Vocational for high school. The third generation went to Holy Spirit School and then to St. Mark’s, De La Warr, Padua, and Ursuline for high school. They indicate that the family construction business specialized in the construction of high schools, building St. Mark’s, William Penn, Newark, and Christiana high schools. They also worked on University of Delaware buildings, prisons, and the MBNA building downtown, among others.

Architecture in the subdivision, they note, is unique to the area. Their grandfather was well-connected in the construction industry, and the cousins speculate that he likely enlisted the help of architects he knew to design the houses. Marc notes that each of the houses is unique. All are of brick or stone masonry. Joe Sr. would often use stone left over from other construction jobs; Marc points out that their grandfather’s house has four different colors of brick. The cousins agree that the most unique house on the block is a split-level ranch that Ben Sr. owned. All interior walls in the houses were plaster, and each was decorated to the taste of its occupant. Some in the second generation added onto their homes: Tony recalls his parents enclosing a sunroom to expand the size of the den. Marc and Tony note that the yard is composed of surplus or substandard concrete from the Delaware Memorial Bridge, acquired by Joe Sr.’s connections. As kids, they remember that, for years, the trucks would arrive at all times of day. Much of the landscaping is original to the area, although the cousins note that an older property-line wall was replaced in the 1950s to the 1980s with shadow block.

In reference to the racial composition of the area, Marc notes that the area was mostly white until the 1950s and 1960s, when developers built Dunleith, Rosegate, and Oakmont. When asked, they described the whole area as predominantly Black but remember Garfield Park as integrated and Collins Park, Castle Hills, and Minquadale as white. As kids, the Rizzos remember little animosity between their family and the Black residents of the area saying, “We never bother them, they never bother us.” The cousins remember the Wilmington riots in 1968-1969 but said that, because they were still young, they did not understand it well. They recalled race-related fights

spilling over from De La Warr High School to the grounds of Holy Spirit School. They also remember their grandfather employing several nearby Black residents. The cousins relate that, as an immigrant from Italy, their grandfather had been called many ethnic slurs following his arrival in the U.S.

While a limited number of non-family members resided in the subdivision in the earlier days, in more recent years, the old farmhouse and an uncle's house have been subdivided into five units each, and non-family members now reside in the subdivision. Marc attributes this to a lack of a succession plan from the second to the third generation.

ROSE HILL GARDENS

Crystal Taylor**Current and Historical Rose Hill Gardens Resident****Route 9 Oral History Project**

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

Interview Date: February 11, 2022

Abstract

Crystal Taylor is a nearly lifelong resident of Rose Hill Gardens, a small subdivision along Route 9 with two-story duplex homes. Her parents purchased a home in the development around 1960—less than a decade following its construction—where they lived when she was born in 1962. She left the development for a stretch of four years for a nursing internship and job in North Carolina and then returned. Taylor currently lives in the same home in which she grew up.

Taylor recalls that her parents had lived in a small, one-bedroom apartment with her sister and an aunt and her family in either Millside or Southbridge before moving to Rose Hill Gardens. By comparison, her family was much more comfortable in their three-bedroom Rose Hill Gardens home. At the time, she asserts, many neighbors were moving from Millside or Southbridge to Dunleith and other neighborhoods along Route 9. Taylor does not recall her neighbors in Rose Hill Gardens having moved there from southern states.

In this interview, Taylor recalls growing up in Rose Hill Gardens, noting that her favorite thing about the neighborhood was her neighbors, whom she describes as forming a close-knit community where people helped each other. Residents in the subdivision held various occupations: there was a painter, a politician, hospital workers, a school nurse, a liquor store employee, a bank employee, and a receptionist, among others. Her own parents were a school custodian at P. S. DuPont High School and a hospital worker. Taylor describes how she and her Rose Hill Gardens friends spent their leisure time together on her next-door neighbor's porch, a memory she reiterates throughout the interview. On occasion, she says, she and her friends would go to the mall, to get pizza, to the nearby Dairy Queen, or to a movie. They would play jump rope, jacks, and other games on their driveways. They also enjoyed playing board games. With one of her friends using a wheelchair, the girls found the wooded path to the nearby park in Dunleith impassable. Taylor remarks on the respect kids had for adults

when she was growing up, saying that they would correct you if you said, “something incorrect.” She contrasts that with kids at present, who she says talk back to adults.

Taylor indicates that her neighborhood did not have a community center that was close by, so she and her friends stayed out of trouble on their porches. She notes that all of the community schools she attended as a child are gone, including Rose Hill Elementary and Dunleith School. She attended church in Dunleith but does not remember that as a focal point for the Rose Hill Gardens neighborhood, which did not have its own church. She remembers a community baseball team that played in the open field that later became a park. The civic association would hold a Labor Day cookout each year in the field, and she also remembers a Halloween party they organized one year.

As far as architectural alterations to the houses in her neighborhood, Taylor indicates that some people added dens to the rear of their homes over the years and recalls a two-story addition to the rear of one of the houses. In her own home, her family redid their kitchen and bathroom, made improvements to closet doors, painted, replaced windows and the roof, and put siding and stucco on the outside of the house. She says the main thing she would change about her home in Rose Hill Gardens is that she wishes it had a second bathroom. She also indicates that the house is currently “falling apart” and in need of various repairs.

While she was growing up, Taylor remembers that most of the surrounding neighborhoods were Black. She recalls Collins Park as a white neighborhood and Swanwyck as white with some Black families. She recalls encountering some racism at the local corner store, which she knew as “Esther and Sam’s store,” where she says the owners would watch the Black children closely when they came in. She remembered being accused of stealing a Tasty Cake there in about 1968, when she was in first grade, which she had not done. Taylor attended Delcastle High School. As one of only eight Black students in her school, she recalls encountering hostility from some white students.

In Taylor’s memory, all of the homes in her subdivision were owner-occupied by middle-class Black families when she was growing up in the 1960s and ‘70s. With the increase in rentals in her neighborhood in recent decades, Taylor laments the loss of neighborliness and says few people are interested in participation in the civic association, which still takes responsibility for snow removal. She attributes some of this to the purchase of homes by landlords who care most about extracting profit from their investments. She reflects on how the demographics

of the neighborhood have changed in the past two or so decades to include more residents who are younger, lower income, and Hispanic. She indicates that she has seen some drug deals in Rose Hill Gardens and is unhappy with the dangerous speed at which people drive through her very small neighborhood, some apparently mistaking it for Rogers Road. This latter phenomenon resulted in a crash on her front lawn some years before.

Brenda Timmon-Gunter**Current and Historical Rose Hill Gardens Resident****Route 9 Oral History Project**

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

Interview Date: June 30, 2022

Abstract

Brenda Timmon-Gunter is a current and historical resident of Rose Hill Gardens, a community along the Route 9/New Castle Avenue corridor. Having previously lived in Millside, a nearby public housing project built during World War II, Timmon-Gunter and her family moved into the Rose Hill Gardens community around 1962. Having lived there until 1976, before leaving for college and returning roughly 10 years later, Timmon-Gunter offers some perspective on the social relations and physical layout of Rose Hill Gardens, as well as community interactions with other local subdivisions. To date, Timmon-Gunter remains an active member of the Rose Hill Gardens Civic Association, providing insight into the changing status of home ownership and demographics in the community.

In this interview, Timmon-Gunter recalls life in Rose Hill Gardens from 1962 intermittently through to the present day. She remarks on how many young families owned homes in the community when she was growing up there and how that has changed to predominantly renters in the community. Like many others in the neighborhood, Timmon-Gunter's family relocated for her father's work with Chrysler. She recalls a sizeable number of individuals who also worked for the company and how they moved to Delaware from Detroit as a result. As she describes it, her home in Rose Hill Gardens was small for all six family members, but the homes in Dunleith were even smaller. She remembers feeling a sense of differentiation between people who lived in Rose Hill Gardens compared to those in Dunleith but couldn't understand, at such a young age, why that was.

Describing her childhood home, Timmon-Gunter says that owning a home was a big deal for her parents. Having originally moved from Natchitoches, Louisiana, which she described as "poverty stricken" at the time, Timmon-Gunter's parents took immense pride in their home. Over the years, Timmon-Gunter recalls her parent's making changes and alterations to the house, most notably, the addition of a screened-in back patio that the family used as a TV room. She personally recalls not enjoying the house very much because it was not an independent

structure, and there was not much room to run around and play. She notes that many families in the neighborhood had installed chain-link fences around their property, which she has always despised. She attributes the prevalence of these fences to a fencing company located near the community.

Although there is now Rose Hill Community Center, Timmon-Gunter recalls that as a child, the baseball field in Dunleith functioned as the center of the community. She recalls that everyone in the community would come out for games, which were “really, a big deal.” She notes that the area around the baseball fields were used for cookouts and community events, but her recollection of the area goes back to before it had been cleared out and formally established with other game fields, paved paths, and gazebos. Timmon-Gunter adds that life in Rose Hill Gardens was centered around people’s homes, as well. As she remembers it, “Everybody knew everybody,” gathering on porches was a common sight, and all of the kids would play together despite the occasional neighborhood fights.

Describing recreational opportunities for herself and other children, Timmon-Gunter says there weren’t many formal activities. She recalls her parents being strict about where and with whom to play, not often letting her and her siblings venture outside the front yard. She notes that most families had access to cars as well as public transportation; however, her family primarily relied on their car to get around. When speaking about racial demographics, Timmon-Gunter recalls that neighborhoods such as Rosegate, Dunleith, Simons Gardens, Eden Park, and Hamilton Park were generally considered Black neighborhoods, whereas Swanwyck and Collins Park were white neighborhoods. Of the local communities, Timmon-Gunter only remembers Garfield Park as being integrated in the late 1960s and early ‘70s. Brenda attended both Dunleith and Rose Hill schools for her elementary education and later attended De La Warr High School in the late 1970s, remembering it as being predominantly Black. She recalls much of her early education being shaped by access and progressing desegregation efforts.

In the final 10 minutes of the interview, Timmon-Gunter discusses the stores and shops in Rose Hill Gardens and how they have changed hands over time. She recalls taking trips with her family to visit relatives in Louisiana or Texas when she was younger and staying behind as she got older to watch her siblings while her parents made the trip independently. She notes that neighbors would keep an eye on her and her siblings, back when there used to be a real sense of community. Now, Timmon-Gunter laments that that feeling of togetherness has declined over the years as the community changes from mostly family-oriented occupants to older/individual residents.

Timmon-Gunter tries to remain an active member of the Rose Hill Gardens community despite these shifting attitudes, acting as president of the civic association and attempting to revitalize community interest in local affairs.

ROSEGATE

Bobby Benjamin**Former Rosegate Resident****Route 9 Oral History Project**

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

Interview Date: June 30, 2022

Abstract

Bobby Benjamin is a former resident of Rosegate, a community along the Route 9/New Castle Avenue corridor. Having previously lived in the City of Emporia, Virginia, Benjamin moved into his Rosegate home around 1965 where his sister, Juanita Krump, had been living. Benjamin, his wife, and their daughter lived in the home until around 1990 when they relocated just outside of the community on New Castle Avenue. Having lived in the area for nearly 50 years, Benjamin offers some perspective on the changing demographics, visual layout, and community activities in Rosegate. Having served as president of the civic association in Rosegate, Benjamin provides insight into community upkeep and how that has changed over time.

In this interview, Bobby Benjamin recalls life in Rosegate from 1965 until the late-twentieth century. He remarks on the transition from owner-occupied homes to the increased presence of rental properties in the neighborhood and the general attitude of Rosegate members towards other communities in the area, and vice versa. As one of the first housing developments in the area that allowed people of color to own property, Benjamin reflects on the prevalence of Black families that lived in the community. Towards the end of his time in the community, Benjamin recalls a general decline in home upkeep and maintenance, lamenting on the visual quality of Rosegate.

Benjamin describes the general demographic of Rosegate as predominantly working-class African American families, both younger and older. He recalls that a large population of Rosegate community members worked for Chrysler and General Motors at the time, as well as the Dupont Chemical Company, with some teachers and hospital workers living there as well.

When Benjamin purchased his Rosegate home in 1965, he recalls feeling immense pride in being a homeowner. He believes that many people in Rosegate felt similarly. Although he notes that communities such as Oakmont

were typically considered more “upscale” than Rosegate (mainly because they were larger, independent houses), Benjamin enjoyed living in Rosegate as did his family. He does not recall making any major renovations or alterations to the home, noting that he was content with the house as it was. Over the years, many Rosegate families had chain-link fences installed around their property; however, Benjamin suggests that these must have been later additions, and he never had nor installed a fence.

Functioning as a community center, Benjamin recalls that the formal center and later civic association operated out of the Rose Hill Primitive School. Children in the area generally attended either Rose Hill or Dunleith elementary schools, and most highschoolers went to De La Warr. The Coleman Memorial United Methodist Church in Dunleith also functioned as a community center where members would gather to discuss local affairs. Describing recreational opportunities in the area, Benjamin recalls a popular nightclub adjacent to Rosegate that burned down, formerly located where the United House of Prayer Church now stands.

Benjamin recalls very few major changes to the subdivision or its infrastructure during his time as a Rosegate resident. The most prevalent change he notes is the addition of a parking lot in the community, which came about after he had relocated to his home on New Castle Avenue.

In the final five minutes of the interview, Benjamin discusses his reasonings for moving out of the Rosegate community and his later move to North Carolina, where he currently resides. Although he considers his life in Rosegate as “something in the past,” Benjamin attributes this sentiment to his friends and acquaintances in the community who have largely moved out of the subdivision. He remembers his time in Rosegate fondly and notes that had his wife not developed health issues later in life, he would likely still be living in Delaware.

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

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

Interview Date: January 24, 2022

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.

Appendix A: Standard Questions

General

Can you state your name, age, and where you live?

How long have you lived / did you live in _____ neighborhood?

-Follow up: Were you a first owner of a property there?

Experience of Architecture

Can you describe how you felt about your home and neighborhood when you first moved there—and did that change over time?

Were there any features of the interior of the house you especially appreciated or liked?

Did you make alterations or renovations to your home?

In what ways did other subdivision residents customize their homes?

-Follow up: Additions? Landscaping features?

Do you recall any major neighborhood/subdivision changes while you lived there?

Demographics & Community

Did more people own or rent in the neighborhood? Did that change over time?

Where did people in _____ development work?

How would you characterize the people who lived in the neighborhood? Is that different now?

Did the demographics or community in the _____ neighborhood change over time? If so, how?

If you purchased your home, what was home financing like?

Where did children in the neighborhood go to school? Were the schools built before or after the subdivision was developed?

Where did you/your family move from? Where did your neighbors relocate from?

[What was the reason? Motivating factors?] (Other parts of Wilmington, other places in Delaware?)

Were there any places that were sort of the center of the community in your mind?

How did you receive information about your community?

Any recurring community events?

Racial dynamics

What do you remember about the availability of housing during the 1960s and 1970s?

Do you remember specific developments or neighborhoods that were considered Black, or White, or integrated? Did this change over time?

Do you remember specific incidents of racial tension or conflict in the neighborhoods along Route 9/New Castle Avenue?

Quality of life

What did owning a home in _____ mean to you?
(What did renting/ living in _____ mean to you?)

What were the recreational opportunities in the area like?
- Follow up: Any neighborhood parks or ballfields? Community centers?

What was your primary means of transportation? What transportation resources were your neighbors using to get around?

What percentage of your neighbors drove or used public transportation?

How was the community maintained? Was there a neighborhood association? Were any amenities provided by New Castle County (streetlights, plowing, etc.)?

Appendix B: Finding Aid

Route 9 / New Castle Avenue Oral History Project 2021-2023

Name	Date of Interview	Neighborhood	Media	Transcribed?
Allee Watson	1/24/22	Rosegate	Audio and video	Yes
Crystal Taylor	2/11/22	Rose Hill Gardens	Audio and video	Yes
Bobby Benjamin	3/21/22	Rosegate	Audio and video	Yes
Brenda Timmon-Gunter	3/24/22	Rose Hill Gardens	Audio and video	Yes
Charles Watts	3/30/22	Castle Hills	Audio and video	Yes
Sandra Smithers	4/19/22	Dunleith	Audio and video	Yes
Sodonia Parker	5/25/22	Oakmont	Audio and video	Yes
Marc Rizzo, Anthony (Tony) Rizzo, Ben Rizzo	6/3/22	Rizzo Avenue	Audio and video	Yes
John Ridgeway	6/4/22	Dunleith	Audio and video	Yes
Edythe Pridgen	6/9/22	Dunleith	Audio and video	Yes
Barbara Hicks, Joseph Pinkett, Gilbert Pinkett, Reginald Davis	6/12/22	Buttonwood	Audio and video	Yes
Gerald (Jerry) Collins	10/14/2022	Holloway Terrace	Audio and video	Yes
Octavia Penny Dryden	12/16/22	Rosegate	Audio and video	Yes

Note: all audio, video, and transcript files are on file at the Center for Historic Architecture and Design's archive, as well as with DelDOT Byways Program.

