

TMP-007

Interviewee: Carl Fischer

Interviewer: Jessica Taylor

Date: July 15, 2013

T: This is Jessica Taylor interviewing Carl Fischer on July 15, 2013 in King William County, Virginia. Mr. Fischer, can you please state your full name?

F: My name is Carl Robert Fischer.

T: Okay. What is your date of birth?

F: November 15, 1939.

T: Where were you born?

F: In Rahway, New Jersey.

T: Did you grow up there?

F: Not in Rahway, but I grew up in New Jersey until I was seventeen, and then I left to join the Navy.

T: What are your parents' names and occupations?

F: My father's was Robert Fischer and he was a tool and die maker. My mother was Elsie, and she was a housewife.

T: Okay. Did you have any siblings?

F: I had a one sister who was a year and half younger than I was.

T: I know you've had many lives, but can you talk about your occupations?

F: I mentioned before that I started--I left New Jersey to join the Navy. I was somebody that didn't have a lot of interest in going to college or anything like

that. The Navy was a great escape, but it also was an opportunity for me to realize that I needed to further my education. [Laughter] By volunteering to go in the Navy, I had a choice of what area I wanted to go into. So I chose to go into the Hospital Corps. I got trained as a Naval Hospital Corpsman. When I got out, I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do, so I was the first male nurse at a place called Wagner College in Staten Island, New York. All the other people were female. The year behind me was my wife, who I had met, who was also a year behind me in the nursing school. So, I graduated from there, double-majored in nursing and psychology. The next decision was, what do I do? So I applied at several places. I got accepted in for a master's in nursing at the State University of New York in Buffalo. They wanted me to take one more course to go into clinical psychology. I decided I would go and get my master's in nursing. So I got a master's degree in nursing and then got pretty well unhappy with the profession of nursing and said, what can I-? 'Cause I thought at that point in time that it was really a female-dominated area. When I went there, I was supposed to get an emphasis on administration, but they really didn't do it. So I took all my elective classes in the school of business. Here I am now, about to get married, been to college for six years, and still don't know what I want to do. I talked to the hospital administrator at the hospital in Buffalo, New York, where I was going to school. He said, why don't you consider hospital administration? I applied to the Yale School of Medicine and got married, left there, and went and got another master's of public health, health administration from Yale, stayed on at Yale, and running their hospital there as an associate administrator. From there, I went to

Cincinnati, where I was a number-two person at Cincinnati. From Cincinnati, I went to Little Rock, Arkansas. These are all university teaching hospitals where I was the CEO. In 1986, I came to Virginia to be the CEO of Virginia Commonwealth University, or MCV, whatever you wanted to call it back in those days. And I retired from there in 2003.

T: So what have you been doing since then?

F: Absolutely everything I can do that didn't have anything to do with healthcare-related. [Laughter] The first thing that I did, actually going on a historic house tour, was find out about the Archaeology Society of Virginia. The house that I live in here, where we're here today, this was built in 1745 and it was an Indian village, so I've found a lot of artifacts. So I said to myself, wouldn't it be neat to know something about this? So, I got involved in the Archaeology Society of Virginia. I was working with the archaeologists at Shirley Plantation in 2004, I guess it was. He left, and I said, is there anybody in my area that I might be able to continue to work with? And they said, well, there are two young men called Thane and David. So I called them up, and that's how I got involved in Gloucester, and that's how I got familiar with the gas station.

T: Can you explain kind of what you do for the Fairfield Foundation?

F: Well, I started out originally as somebody--and I still do work with them in the field, but then I got appointed to the board. I guess it's either been three or five years. I can't remember. When you're having fun the time goes by, but I know I'm at least in my second term as the board president. I have one more year as

president of the board, which I've told them they're going to find somebody new at that point in time. Because it's important--people shouldn't stay in a position like that too long.

T: That's true. Where do you see Fairfield fitting in in this kind of community?

F: In its community?

T: Yeah.

F: Okay. Well, as you know, we have aspirations to change Fairfield's mission to go beyond what had to date been mainly the Fairfield Plantation to get into historic services, help people with restoration, National Register and so forth. That's what we're focusing on, as the gas station would really become a main education center. It's a wonderful location at the intersection of two roads. I'm not from that area, but anybody you talk to remembers the old gas station and could tell you a few stories about if they had been there for a while. It's a great location; it would give them good, prominent position within the community right there.

T: You do a lot of things with historic architecture. Where do you see advocacy for old buildings and old property sites in the future? Does it have a place in an urbanizing environment?

F: We sort of had ups and downs in terms of preservation of buildings. It's only really been in this last century where we started to appreciate some of the things that we had. We tore them all down before. And there's some people that are interested and some people not interested in that. You can't save every building

that there is, but those that have some significance, we should try to preserve them. Probably in urban centers, we have a better chance of getting them preserved than me, where I am, in a rural setting. I'm involved with the historical society. We own a 1734 church and some adjoining property that we are trying to put a county easement on, not a state easement on. Tomorrow night, I have to go to the second hearing where I'm getting violent opposition from all the neighbors that they don't want me to put it in an historic district. Some of the members of the board of supervisors don't want something put in an historic district. It shows that there's quite a difference in some of the rural areas where people don't want change. They're fearful of change and so forth. In an urban area, I think there's more of an opportunity to preserve things if you have the funds to do so. [Laughter]

T: How do we make it relevant to people that maybe don't care about it or don't understand it right now?

F: Well, I think you have to educate to get people. Dave Brown, he's my backup tomorrow night at the board of supervisors meeting. I said, I'm going to say what I can say, and then you're going to be there to fill in all the background. I've talked to David about all the frustration, and he feels as I do. Even if we don't get this accomplished, we've done some education in relationship to the community of the importance of history and the importance of preservation. We've talked about what the state does and so forth, what's on the National Register and so forth. Whether we accomplish it or not, all wasn't lost. We've at least educated some people in the community about the need for preservation.

T: Has public awareness grown in the last two decades that you've noticed?

F: Oh, yes. Sure. I don't know if they've gotten to this county, but [Laughter] certainly in the country, there's a lot of interest in that.

T: Do specific properties or moments stick out to you?

F: I've been a member of the National Trust for Historic Preservation for a long number of years. I get their articles and so forth, so I can see everything that's been done. I guess one preservation thing that almost got torn down which kind of comes to mind is Grand Central Station in New York City. We almost lost that. Although it's not an eighteenth-century building, it's a very significant building and a big part of history.

T: Yeah. I mean, being a northerner, that probably affects you differently, but did you notice like an emotional response to the pressure to demolish that structure?

F: Sure. Yeah, I didn't think it should be demolished. They did a wonderful job of preserving it.

T: Okay. How else has preservation as you've known it—so, in this area—changed over the last twenty years?

F: In this county, I think there's been very little change in interest. I'll give you an example. I'm also involved with the county's historic and architecture review board. What I found was there were historic districts that were established, but the people that were on that committee didn't know where they were and they didn't know anything about it. They didn't know anything about the real function.

That committee was set up probably in the [19]70s by statute, and it has existed over these years, has done very little or nothing, and nobody knew anything about it. We were supposed to be responsible for overseeing structures that were in a county historic district and to approve any changes to those. So I said to them, how do you go about making--because we did have a couple that came up to be reviewed once we found where the historic districts are. First of all, we went to the tax areas and found tax maps of where the historic areas were defined, made sure the deeds recorded that they were historic districts, and then I said to them, how do you determine when you approve some changes to one of these historic buildings? They said, well, you know, we kind of look at it and decide. I said, you have no criteria? Ugh! So, then I got everybody a copy of the Department of Interior's standards for renovation. This is only four years ago, that. So you can see where this county was. Nobody knew anything about anything if it was in an historic district. We have fifteen homes that are on the National Register in this county. And the thing that we just got the county to put in a grant to do, an inventory of the--it's a matching grant. The historical society is really up-fronting the money for the county to start to do an inventory of the county. We have an old, old map that shows where all the structures and things were. We're going to try to update that, and the next thing that we want to try to do is to try to identify what are areas of this county are worth preserving, and what are areas of this county where we should probably get it on the National Register or we should get them in a historic district or something like that. Before, these things got torn down over time. There was no mechanism or anything to

worry about it. So we're talking about, in this county, some changes, not a whole lot in the last four years.

T: If you had to critique the sort of methods of the people that are interested in preserving things and the preservationists, what would you say?

F: You mean what their background might be? What causes them to be interested in preservation?

T: No, if you could improve the tactics or the philosophies of preservation, what would you say or do?

F: First, you have to convince somebody that preservation of something has some meaning. If we tear down everything, everything will look like what was just recently built, and we'll have no bridge to the past. We can understand culture also through architecture, so we lose some of culture there, also. And we lose history, because all these buildings are related to history also. Now, you can't preserve every building, but I think maybe you can convince people that there are certain buildings that are important to be saved. I think the other thing that you have to do is these necessarily don't have to be old, but they have to be unique in some way. National Trust says fifty years is their cut-off, so we can have something fifty years old that's important enough to be preserved.

[Laughter] People can understand a three-hundred-year old building, but some people can't understand why you want to preserve a fifty-year old building.

[Laughter] That's another challenge.

T: For you personally, how do you prioritize? If you see two buildings, how do you decide which one is worth saving?

F: First I'd like to find out the history of the building. Then I think you have to do an analysis of the building and what's involved in preserving it. You might find one of those buildings are beyond preservation. I mean, everything can be preserved, but you might put a hundred percent [Laughter] recycled material in that one building and you wouldn't have much left. With the other one, it might not be significant. Of course, the relationship to it, too: what's the ability to get the funds to do the building? Now, if they were sort of equal in need for renovation, I would weigh what's the historical background or historical significance of the building. And if one was stronger than the other, and they were about equal or near close to one another in terms of cost to restore it, I would weigh more towards the one that had more historical background. Now I'm talking about people involved in the building, the architecture of the building, and so forth.

T: Yeah. Sometimes I worry about that especially. I just got back from Mississippi, for example, and the homes that a lot of the DHR people have put on the Register are plantation homes from the nineteenth century, because that's what tourists want to come see.

F: Sure. But they didn't have any slave quarters out there? [Laughter]

T: No, exactly.

F: And other things.

T: So how do we convince people of all historical significances or multiple contexts that are significant?

F: Because they're part of history. They're part of the culture. I mean, people should be interested in how the people lived in those slave quarters just as much as how the other person lived in the mansion. But we've seen a lot of renewal in African-American history. I mean, one of the things that struck me: I started a museum for this county through the historical society five years ago. I spent a year of my life doing all the research for it, and put together a committee to help me, and I wanted to make sure it was representative of the community. We have two Indian reservations here. Before the Civil War, this was about sixty-five percent African-American in this county; now, it's about twenty-five. So when I put the committee together, I wanted representation of the population. There were no Indians or African-Americans involved in the historical society. [Laughter] So, we said that half of the members of the museum council didn't have to be part of the historical society, and we got African-Americans and we got Native Americans on there. Now, what I'm leading up to is, we tried to go back and get information to try to put things in the museum to represent those groups. On the African-American side, they had not preserved very much of their history. They couldn't tell me a lot about the background. They had very few artifacts that we could use. So, we had to go through whatever literature we could find to try to document the African-American existence in this community, because the African-Americans had lost, had not kept that up. I mean, I found the same thing, unfortunately, with the Native Americans. Some of them knew something about it, but others...I and

other people knew a lot more about their history than they knew about. They could get you tribal stories that had been passed on, okay? But they probably couldn't tell you a story of when the Indians got slaughtered in different years and so forth here and what happened to them. After I assembled the museum, we got these artifacts and these things down, I said to myself, it's nice to have a museum. But to me, the importance of the museum is not to display artifacts, but to collect information that's historical in nature and preserve it. So they had no artifacts, but they had rich history. [Laughter] I would feel I would still be a success in relationship to the museum business. One of the examples, somebody gave us a letter written in, I think, December around 1730 to the colonial governor asking if he could be the sheriff of King William County. I thought that would be interesting to find out, since we were going to display his letter to the colonial governor, whether he ever became the sheriff of King William County. Well, I went to the county clerk's office—unfortunately, most of our records were burned—but they had no record of that. I went to the sheriff's office; they had never kept any records of who the sheriffs were. Finally, I found out through the Virginia Historical Society that in fact, he was appointed for one year by the governor as sheriff of King William County. To me, that artifact wasn't as important as getting the facts and figures and the history together.

T: Well, that's wonderful. So creating an inclusive environment that incorporates African-American and Native American people but also history is clearly important to you. How do you think the field can improve on that over time?

F: I think we're making great strides in terms of documentation of African-American history in the country. When I pick up the *William and Mary Quarterly* and look in the back of that, [Laughter] there's probably more books on African-American history than anything else in the back, the new books that are coming out. We're getting that history together. I can't say that there's the same interest in Native American history. There's very little new stuff that's coming out in relationship to them, and I guess there aren't that many of them present with us also.

T: Yeah, that's true. I wanted to ask if you had anything to add about how Fairfield can play a role in kind of solving some of the issues of preservation or moving it forward, because you have a stake in that too, obviously.

F: I think one of the things that Fairfield is doing today is in-field archaeology. The difference, the way Fairfield has gone about it is, you don't stand over the fence and watch them do it. You can with supervision get in and actually dig in the ground. People walk away with different feeling and a different involvement and probably spend a lot more time than somebody just looking over the fence. [Laughter] What we're doing is teaching future generations about archaeology, and also what archaeology tells us about the culture. That's a big educational thing, and that will breed people that have an interest. Not everybody that's dug in the ground is going to be interested, but I bet you're going to get some that are going to be interested in that. The other thing that our plan is to do is to help people that want to get something on the National Register, and help them do the background and so forth about that. People want to try to establish a historic district, to help them to do that, to put people in contact with people in the

preservation field if somebody needs some help, to publish material that would be read by people and also provide documentation that was important to the field. The significant thing there is that the intent is to reach out to a wider geographic area than just the Gloucester community. It's several counties involved. So, those are some of the way that I think they're going to reach out to probably five or six counties.

T: That's a really bright vision. That's really all I have to ask you. Did you want to contribute anything else to the population of University of Florida?

F: I guess the only interesting thing is, although my career had nothing to do with history, when I got married, my wife and I went to Colonial Williamsburg for our honeymoon. There must have been some history thing there. [Laughter] It's been in the both of us. It's only come out in our later years of life, although we've been interested in history. But we haven't sort of devoted our whole lives to history as we have in recent years.

T: Did you love it when you went?

F: Oh, yeah. We had a great time. We still go back several times a year, because we learn something every time we go back. We parade our grandkids through there. This week, a couple grandkids were here, and took them up to Mount Vernon. [Laughter] We're working on the next generation to try to educate them.

T: That's wonderful. Thank you so much.

F: You're welcome. Thank you for interviewing me.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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