

TMP-023

Interviewee: Nam Vu

Interviewer: Jessica Taylor

Date: July 28, 2013

T: This is Jessica Taylor interviewing Nam Vu on July 28, 2013 in Gloucester County, Virginia. Mr. Vu, can you please state your full name?

V: Yes, my full name is Nam, spelling N-A-M. My middle name is D-U-C and my last name is Vu. V-U.

T: Okay and when were you born?

V: I was born around November 1957.

T: Okay. And I know you've led many lives. So what do you do in Gloucester now?

V: We lived here for the last thirty years plus. And we live here but we work on the other side of Gloucester.

T: Mm-hm. And when did you come to Gloucester?

V: I think we came to Gloucester in 1984.

T: Okay. What was it like coming to Gloucester, what were your first impressions?

V: I like living in the country. It's open. It has lots of room for your family to grow. We got acreage instead of living in the city which very tight. You sacrifice for the drive to live in the country. However, you gain the room, you have a lot more acreage for your family. At that time I feel like, especially have a couple of kids that was very young, one years old and the other one is I think like three or four years old. So I wanted them to have room. So I think the country is to me, I just feel like it's a better way to raise family.

T: What did you think of the people here when you first came?

V: I love the people here. Very friendly, unlike in the city. The country seemed like people stay longer where they are. You don't see a lot of change in your

neighborhood. Or your neighbor, you see some people live there forever. So you feel part of your family. And I just feel a lot more, every time I come home from work I feel like a big family. In my neighborhood everybody know everybody. Not that many- it's neighborhood that may be considered subdivision. But where I live is no more than twenty people. And most of them lived there forever so. Yeah.

T: Before I turned the recorder on we talked a little bit about how you took the architectural elements of some of the colonial homes in the surrounding areas and sort of integrated that into your home here.

V: Yeah.

T: I was wondering if you could talk about that.

V: Uh-huh. That's what, how did you learn that? It must be from David.

T: No, you told me it. [Laughter]

V: Yeah that's right. Okay, yeah, I just did that. Sure, I can share that with you. I can take the architecture between the West and the East and then I like to combine. And we can talk more in detail about how I like to, why did I do that. I wanted to build a house that would suit with the environment, to the surroundings. If I build a house here, we live in style. I'm going to build this house. I may not build the right house for the right area. Even though long time ago the architecture of the old house some of them are different. But one thing I know about that they have a lot of dome. The dome? You notice that? The dome?

T: Yeah absolutely.

V: You see that, very popular. Also another thing I noticed in the old house, it's steep roof. Is that right? You go to like Williamsburg, Virginia or some other area, you

see some old houses there. The roof is very steep. And then after they build a roof steep a long time ago, then they change the style. The roof changing get a little bit small, not as steep. And now everybody go back to the old style with steep roof on it. You know. Is that right so far?

T: Yeah. Great.

V: I think the architecture and how it worked, it went way back. With the steep roof, I'm talking about earlier, if you look at all the old, old houses, it was not that steep. And then they get really steep. Like in the seventeenth century, eighteenth century, it's not that steep. And then it gets really steep later on in the nineteenth century and late, about a hundred years. The roof get really steep. And then they change it a little bit but now they go back to what it was. A long time now they build the steep roof now. So I think they found that one of the best-looking of the architecture.

T: Yeah.

V: If you notice that. And I think- I look at way over there, look at Warner Hall. You been to Warner Hall? They come by the estate. They are in the seventeenth, but the roof is still gabled, the roof is not really steep steep but it's still steeper. It's not really flat, modern-looking. I noticed that in a lot of buildings.

T: What do you think about having all of these ancient huge houses all around you? Most Americans don't get to experience that.

V: Yeah. I like it, that's why I build this house. To at least to match or bigger.

[Laughter]

T: Okay. That's wonderful. And can you talk a little bit about, I know that you've been

in real estate in Gloucester a little bit. What brought you into that?

V: I was an engineer. You know, forty years ago, engineer don't make money and you're going to make it today. The demand went up in this country. After all, everybody in the whole world right now is fighting for engineers. They realized that technology, everything you want to move ahead and do better. You gotta have a good engineer mind to build and design, to manufacture. Everything is involving engineering or technology. So engineering is becoming a very, very valuable degree. However, I'm just talking about my career here. I knew I was valuable, and what you're doing, which is- I told David that's a loss. And I'm aware of that. I would have a fundraiser for them over here last month. I feel that's a lost art and I realized they need to be maintained so I think that's important. But when you ask me about what made me get into real estate, right? My background, I'm still an engineer. I work as an engineer. Again to real estate, to go back, I just told you that forty years ago they don't pay as much. Seem like not that appreciated, the engineer at that time. They get paid by not that much compared to lawyer or doctor or other degree, maybe we paid just a little bit more than what you all get paid. [Laughter] And a lot of responsibility. You know, engineer make mistake you can blow out whole building and kill a lot of people. But doctor can only kill one people, but doctor make significant more. So get back to that, see that I don't make that much money and I have children. I want them to live well. So I only had one choice. I utilize my talent, applying to a real life and beside somebody, but also I can be able to use my talent apply to work for me. So I start my own building and remodeling the building. And it turned out

you know, just my hobby, my own building, remodeling it. So I started doing real well with that, making it mine. And I look at it. Different architecture. One of the most successful ideas of making a building in Gloucester. Have you seen the building?

T: Which one is it?

V: The Gloucester Medical Building.

T: No, I haven't.

V: Uh-huh. It was a flat-roof building. And I may have some pictures, you want me to share them with you?

T: Yeah, of course.

V: Yeah. It was a flat-roof building like an old school. A lot of the old schools have a flat roof. The reason why they have flat roof is they don't want the schools big. So I had to put a slope on it. And they made it flat so that it can become a hurricane shelter or something. The wind couldn't blow it. Long time ago, they don't have the technology to design the roof structure where the engineer would to make it real strong. So they had them make it flat. And you know flat roof look ugly. Period. Other than flat, problem. And it'll look good, right? Always look unfinished, no matter what. When you have a roof on it, it look like it put a finish on it. So the medical building is the same way, it looked flat. It looked real ugly, it just- I put a roof on it with a dome, turned it into a colonial building. One of my first projects in the Courthouse. And I did very well on that project. That's why I do something that make it look good for the county and make a great investment for me cause when I sell the building I make a substantial amount of money selling the

building. Because it look good. And people are willing to rent, and are willing to be there. So I rent it to a nice children's hospital. And then I sell it after all, I sell the whole project out to another investor. So that's when I started. And then I do a couple other projects. The next one I'm going to do next year is the, I bought the building department. That's what I'm going to do next.

T: Wow, what are you going to do with it?

V: I want to change the- I try to maintain the look of the old timer. I don't want to change too much of the house. The front of it, I want to leave it but I want to, of course, redo the roof. I want to put a new roof on it so that the house will be better. But still it's going to be a better roof. I want to leave all the handle the way it is. I want to fix it so it'll look nice and clean up the brick and paint. The blocks are the old blocks. You can't buy enough block, you have to make that block. That's an antique block. That's probably in the early nineteenth century. I want to maintain the way that look. That's what I aim for. And then in the back side I'm going to do something different. But that's irrelevant, that's not as important compared to the front. The front faces Main Street. Very important to me that I want to fix it right. I want to fix it so it won't be out of style, it won't be out of place. I want to fix the planning and the rest for Main Street. So you drive down Main Street you feel like you-

[BREAK IN INTERVIEW]

T: This is Jessica Taylor continuing the interview with Nam Vu on July 27, 2013. I wanted to ask you about the aesthetic that you create on the front of the building versus the back of the building. What's more important to you, the individual

character of the building or the character of its context, the street or the neighborhood?

V: The one I'm going to do, the one that's on Main Street I'm going to do next year? To me it's important for, not for myself but also for the community, for a whole. That everybody up in Main Street and the people who live in Gloucester. I think it's important to compromise not for your own benefit but also for the community benefit. In order to do that, you have to be able to design a building that already there but benefit for the future. For example, I want to leave the overhang right now, which is where the public like to sit down and enjoy with a hot day like today or yesterday. Like this week was hot, a hundred degree. The tourists go visit Main Street. They may sit down at the bench and enjoy, cool off a little bit from the shade. People ought to keep walking to the next store. I would like to maintain that. I could change that for my benefit for more space, for rent. However, to me it's just come to a point. You live here long enough, you begin to do care about your community. And you want to do better to return what you take from your community. So that's important to me, so I want the building not to be--again I bring back what I was just talking about, I don't want it to look so stand-out. I want to be blend in with the rest of the old buildings there. So I don't want to be stand-out, too significant. Make all the other look obvious. So that's important. You have to go with what was there if you do the right architecture.

T: What are some of the economic benefits of preservation work like yours?

V: I don't understand that question. Can you give me an example?

T: Well you know, one of the things that you mentioned was that tourists could use

the building as a place to cool off and so it's a place that supports the tourist economy in that way. But when you renovate old buildings, I was kind of asking if there's economic benefits for everyone. On Main Street, for example. If you foresee anything like that.

V: With our project, it definitely will benefit not just for me doing the building but better for my building. But I'm sure the way I'm doing it, it will benefit for the whole community. It will bring in more tourists. Everybody thinking the same way. If they somehow can be able to invest in remodeling the building to benefit everybody to draw more tourists, set up a good design, what you want to do. If you want to design a storefront, you want to design for a restaurant. You know, whatever you want to design something that you bring in more and more tourists. And when tourists come to Main Street they want to have a place to come, they're looking for things to buy. They want to walk through the store and they want to see the painting they're looking for, stuff to buy. You don't want to have a lot of office on Main Street. Maybe some, but not a lot because office building is really not desirable for tourists come to visit. They have nothing to see. I feel like the way I plan to design that building, it'll greatly benefit just I think the whole community.

T: How do you see Fairfield Foundation fitting into this? I know that you've done a lot of work with them, but how do you see them sort of helping Main Street long-term?

V: Fairfield Foundation, I think they set a good example for a lot of people to remember the history where we are coming from. Even me, I'm not from here. But this is my country now. And to me it's important to remember I promoted and I

put myself in situation, same thing. I remember where I'm coming from. So I like what Fairfield Foundation doing things that make everybody soon remember where we coming from no matter what country we from or who we are. So we all have a same, a common bond together as Americans. I think what they have done is they set a good example and I hope that the people will recognize like I do and support them so that their project will be a success. It would be tough in this economy. I feel like we live in a very, very competitive economy now. This country used to be the very best of the best when I was young, when I was back in my old country. And I would want to come here because it's a very strong, very strong economy. But now they be compete a lot of times worldwide, so do what Fairfield Foundation is doing more than ever. It gets tougher. It needs more support in the entire business. But people still are there, I'm not the only one. There's a lot supporting them. And I think they will be success at the end.

T: Great. So more broadly defined outside of Main Street, what would you like Gloucester to look like in the future? What's your vision for it?

V: I'd like to see Gloucester maintain a bedroom community. The place that people come here to live with their family and grow family. I cannot- in my picture in my mind I couldn't see Gloucester become like a big city. Just the way we are. We don't have good transportation in the way that we're located. That would be very limited as into that into the more industrial-type area. But I love city. So the best for Gloucester to be a nice bedroom community, draw more tourists into Gloucester Courthouse. Gloucester has significant amount of historical--nobody could ever even in imagination until they start listening to it. For example, right

around my driveway when you come in? There's a little small cemetery that Captain Sinclair buried there. You know who Captain Sinclair is?

T: No, I do not.

V: He owned Land's End estate. And I make it a quick story. Way back when there was a war going on and he fight for the war and all that. His house was built probably about maybe like three miles from here. And his house was built a long way back from the water. It's on the Severn River. And we always wonder why his beautiful view of the water, but how come the house sat back so far? And the reason why is because the cannon in the seventeenth century, they can only reach but so far [Laughter] while they're here when they're attacking. So he had to build, set back just far enough so when they shoot the cannon it was not going to hit his house. And Glen Roy Estate, I don't know if you know Glen Roy. I have a very good friend of mine, owns Glen Roy and he tell me the story about Glen Roy on the roof. The general at Glen Roy, when they build that house, when you go all the way up to the roof and you open the hatch there was an observation block on it. So he can go all the way up there and he can see all the way out the Chesapeake Bay so he can see who's coming and who going. [Laughter] You know, it was blowing me away but that's the reason why they have a block on the roof, that's what the observation block for.

T: What aspects of Gloucester's history are most interesting to you? Do you have particular moments or decades or centuries in mind that you think should be accentuated?

V: I like just about everything, nothing really specific pinpoint on a specific period of

the history. We went way back, very far back to like--I'm not really into the history like you and David and Thane, but he might remember and I know people who know the story of how you know, White Hall, Warner Hall, Five Gables, Eagle Point. I told you Land's End, **Level Green**, I look at them all. Some of these estates have been around a long long time. one of my friends owned Capahosic, it's on the York River. I mean like long way back. But anyway, so it's very interesting that Gloucester have such a tremendous amount of story, and in Warner Hall, the George Washington family was buried over there. Warner Hall is about four or five miles from my house. So really to me it's very significant. And the tourists, when they come to Gloucester they can have their appointment. They go tour and go around to see more historical sites. I hope that somebody will map them out for the tourists. Some organization like Fairfield Foundation-- how I'm thinking about, maybe they'll map out where the significant historical--like where George Washington's family was buried at Warner Hall, which a lot of tourists that may have heard but they may not be able to map out and see it. But something to consider. It's possible that if you do some study you may be able to help map that route out. If not that's far. Actually you go by a loop: you're running about within ten mile, fifteen mile radius, you hit every one of them. So that's something I'm thinking about a lot but I've never had a chance to express it to Thane and David. How do we do the map that out, so that when people come over here they come to Gloucester not to see the plan but to see the building. They come to Gloucester for [inaudible 15:05] something that's old, historical. It'd be good to have a very good--only map out—there's a lot of maps about

Gloucester. But specific map out where do you really want to come to see historical history. You know, where George Washington's family was buried, where Captain Sinclair, he used his house. You may not be able to go in there but you can see or you can read about something, a template. Then go to Main Street, maybe a little Main Street, some kind of library for example when Fairfield open, when they opened it up and they are operating in the station, that will be very nice to have all the templates about how Gloucester was, what year it was started and how you historically tell about each story.

T: What do you think about the recent push to put the history of slavery in the forefront?

V: Yeah, there sure is. T.C. Walker was one of the first lawyers in the state of Virginia live in Gloucester. As far as the history of slavery in Gloucester, I think T.C. make a name out of all the African-Americans in Gloucester. And we treat African-Americans in Gloucester very well. Even though I recall back years ago we only named T.C. Walker School, we recognized him. We have a T.C. Walker Street. We have a T.C. Walker marketplace up in Gloucester on Main Street, and a lot of things that deal with T.C. Walker years ago. So Gloucester's recognized the African-American a great deal years ago. So I think that's a good thing.

T: Okay. This may be a silly question, but when you think about the men that own these giant plantations, the estates in the seventeenth and eighteen centuries, what kind of people do you think they were?

V: I have no idea.

T: Yeah?

V: Yeah. I'm not really... no I just didn't go back to that, yeah.

T: All right. I was just wondering. Those were really all the questions that I have unless there's anything you wanted to add.

V: No, I don't have anything. I think that I said Gloucester's a great place and I love here. This is my home here. And I love the people in Gloucester. I like Gloucester. And I don't think I will ever leave here myself. And I wanted to see Gloucester maintained. The environment, the way that Gloucester is. I like to see more tour, maybe more open door from other people that own, live in the estate for tourists. [inaudible 19:48] For example, I think this year we probably have one of the biggest reenactment event going on along Warner Hall. That was very- they did that 2008. And it just blow me away. I went in with my wife and with some of my friends. And you're walking there and the spirit just hit you. Even though I'm not from here you feel like you're back in the seventeenth century, eighteenth century and all the Civil War going on. The setup is almost so real. They're going to do it again this October-

T: Battle of the Hook, yeah.

V: That's going to be one of the things—I'm going and I have a lot of friends come with me this time. That's something that is just that makes American, that make real strong. It just make you feel, it just bring me back and make this proud where do we coming from and how do we come from, how do we get here today. Says it's the hard-working great-grandparent. Creating what we have, what we have today. So that I think to me is- that will put us back together, especially nowadays. With all the crisis going on. All the killing in the school here and there, the spiritual

need to come back. So I think that we will, as long as you're proud to be American, and the only thing that some people, sometime you don't really remember until you see things. For example, the reenactment in Warner Hall happened this year and some other thing happened and you see it, you sometime, you can change your look, what you think about. You say well, this is how our grandparents probably lived, how they fight for freedom, how did they do what buildings today, what we have with our land. We don't have anything. We don't have what we have today. So we take things for granted. So we need to bring back some time to--take a couple step back, we're gonna fall. So that we change, all of us, to be proud to be American. That makes us work harder so we can compete.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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