



Interviewee: Mayor Joseph P. Riley
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Interviewer: Kitty Robinson
Videographer: Carroll Ann Bowers
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BEGIN INTERVIEW

Kitty Robinson: Today is Thursday, April 7, 2005. We have the honor of having Mayor Joesph P. Riley, Jr., with us in the Missroon House, headquarters of the Charleston Foundation for an interview this afternoon. And I think I'll begin with that.

Mayor Riley, you grew up and have spent most of your adult life here in Charleston. I think this October, November, you will have been mayor 30 years. Will you talk about the changes you have seen since your childhood? What you saw then, what you see now?

Joe Riley: Well, in my lifetime, essentially all of which has been spent in Charleston, there have been many changes. And in some respects, many things remain the same. Charleston's more beautiful now than it was when I was a child. The buildings are more beautifully restored. You know, there were billboards on the corner of Rutledge and Tradd Street. And a lot of elements of urban building that changed now are more attractive. The city is more beautiful than it's ever been.

Of the city, when I was growing up had even more people living in it. That was back when not everyone had a car. And many white-collar people used public transportation. There was more diversity of population. There were lots of apartments in buildings that are now single family. And relatively modest rents. So, Charleston has, during that time, become more affluent.

There are elements of our city that now seem quite natural that didn't exist then, like the Waterfront Park. And other elements of access to the waterfront. Liberty Square. The wonderful promenade along Lockwood. So the access to the water is much more wonderful than it was when I was growing up.

In my lifetime, I saw kind of the change and decline and rebirth of King Street. As a young child, it was the shopping center of lower South Carolina. I was born in 1943, so say when I was 10 years old, a time of great awareness as a child, '53, King Street probably was in its heyday. You had everything from Sears Roebuck on King Street and all the local and national

shops. And then I saw it die almost. And then have seen its wonderful rebirth. And I think that now King Street has somewhat different, because nothing ever remains the same -- but it has the wonderful vitality and energy and civic place that it had when I was a child.

And in some respects, much healthier. Market Street was a pejorative term when I was growing up. And now, obviously, with Saks Fifth Avenue and Charleston Place framing part of it, it's a much more wonderful place.

But the thing that hasn't changed is after the result of the Foundation and preservation leaders, the remarkable preservation of this extraordinary 18- and 19th-century place, with its physical beauty in human scale. What hasn't changed is the nourishment and the inspiration that it is for those who live in the midst of it every day. For those who work it, or those who visit, it is a place of inspirational beauty now as it was 62 years ago.

KR: One of the biggest preservation challenges, which you have alluded to already, was the Charleston Place project. And of course we know now that it is just so fabulous. And because of you in the main has brought back King Street. But will you talk about the Charleston Place project when it was to be the convention center, and those years surrounding its going through regulatory boards?

JR: Well, the development of Charleston Place was very controversial. It's important to be reminded that the Historic Charleston Foundation and the Post and Courier supported it. And I say that because you write the preservation history of Charleston, and in that, in some respects, you write it of America. The Foundation, Preservation Society, the strong support of the then Evening Post and New and Courier, were very critical elements of that. And in 1974, the [00:05:44 Right] Face Anderson Report was commissioned, which was the preservation master plan for Charleston. And published in '74 or '75.

And what it said was that the restoration of the commercial core of the city needed energy of new development. And it actually pointed to that intersection of Market and King. And then we did the [00:06:18 Barden Ashman] Plan, which further reinforced that. So, the Historic Charleston Foundation understood that to give energy to commercial buildings, you have to have human beings on the street. And you have to have human beings ready and able to spend money. Otherwise, a commercial building... We can restore residential building because we fall in love with it and it's where our spouse and I would love to live. Or because you have a passion for it.

But a commercial building is only restored when there is a viable commercial use for it. So the Foundation understood the importance of Charleston Place and gave it strong support. The revisionist take on it is that it was a battle over a building that was going to be real tall or something like that, and it really wasn't. What it was, was in the '70s, in America, the recent experience had been suburban development. And so there was a somewhat lack of confidence that cities really could handle a fair number of people.

And the fear was that Charleston Place would overwhelm the city. Well, it never was of giant scale or physical, or in terms of its use. But that was really the battle that was kind of raging in the city. And the Foundation and the Post and Courier understood the need to put a lot

of energy there. At Market and King Street where there was a vacant lot, you had to have human beings using that space and spilling out onto King Street. There were legal battles, Supreme Court, federal court, president's advisory council which supported it. But it was a raging controversy. And it was only because everybody loves this place. And that was very positive.

But of course, and there were lots of discussion about the design and the height. It was originally 11 1/2 stories, reduced to eight, which was much better. But it was the right catalytic agent to spur the redevelopment, and it did. With visitors being there with money to spend, and giving the commercial buildings viability. And then creating the place for locals. I mean the thing about King Street is, perhaps unlike any other Main Street in America but for the very big cities -- New York, Chicago, San Francisco -- is that King Street is alive and bustling. And because of that, the historic commercial buildings have a new life.

KR: As you know, we just talked with Dick Jenrette, who had similar commentary to yours. Not as expansive, yet he said that Meeting Street Facades were such an important part of that project, to which he gave credit to Frances Edmunds. Do you have any specific comment about Frances during that time? You were very complimentary about the Foundation.

JR: Well, Frances was an amazing person, obviously. And among her many qualities was that she was a big thinker, she was a visionary. She cared passionately about details. But she understood history, she understood the history of cities and their development, and death and decline and potential rebirth as [00:10:41 J and J control]. Frances had the big vision. So, she saw the importance of Charleston Place when a lot of her fellow preservationists and the Foundation supported it strongly didn't.

And Frances was very supportive of the project and of the Meeting Street facades. And a lot of people criticized the Meeting Street Facades. It would be a Hollywood façade, and you just got 50 feet of the building. And what Frances understood, and what we understood, was that you needed the parking. But that there would be plenty in Charleston. Fifty feet well used could give a real purpose and energy to the street. And it really did. That's one of the great blocks in Charleston now.

And any day you walk along there, and there are people using it, you know, that space in the city, pedestrian space. So often cities give it short shrift and easily let a parking structure or port-a-cocheres or other uses diminish its human scale quality. And I think that the Meeting Street Facades reinforce that for Charleston. And Frances was very important in that, and everything else that was going on in our community in terms of preservation and development when she was head of the Historic Charleston Foundation.

KR: Another big project during your tenure has been [00:12:24 we call] Visitors Center. Do people still call it the VRTC?

JR: They do, they do, some do.

KR: Would you describe the VRTC project and the reasoning behind it?

JR: Well, if I remember clearly the meeting in my office, it was with Frances and a few others. It was in '77 or '78, and it was when we collectively realized that the accumulated negative impacts, or inconveniences or irritants, of tourism in Charleston were reaching a boiling point. And we understand the great value of tourism in our city. But we were concerned about the ill effects of it. We were also concerned about the boiling over creating a feeling in the community that was strongly anti-tourism.

So, we started a meeting about the negative impact of tourism, and that's what we called it. And really, those meetings would be in my office at 8:00 in the morning on a regular basis. And it was there that I think we collectively came to the realization that a city has the responsibility to determine how people use it. So rather than just one or two things, we worked on the horse diapers. And others, it was to say, okay, people are coming to visit our city. Let's strategically figure out how we want them to use it. Where we want them to go, and how we want them to go about getting where they're going.

So that then began the tourism management plan, which led to the Visitor Transportation Reception Center. But it was, I think that the determination that we, for this city to continue to be the beautiful livable city it was, that we had to accept the responsibility of determining how people used it. So we regulated where buses could go. Before then, buses could go on any street they wanted to. We regulated where carriages could go. We moved the carriage stand. We regulated the number of carriages. We regulated the size of buses, and the different routes.

And then all of that, as we were working on that... And in interesting issue, which helped us understand, was that the Fort Sumter Tour Boat facility was going to go at the end of Broad Street, at the west end of Broad Street. Because land had been available, and the franchisee had gotten the land. It required filling in marsh and all. But when we looked at that, we realized there was no community benefit to that. It was not adjacent to anything that a visitor would be going to. So it meant that every visitor who went there would have to drive their car. It made no sense.

We weren't in control there. We were just saying, well, that's where you want to put it. So we stopped. Went to the Department of Interior, got them to stop that. I mean that project was already under glass. Any time you have a project where it gets to be under glass in a model form, it's very hard to stop. So anyway, it was that understanding of management that led us to the realization that we needed a visitors center that the visitor would know, that's where you go to begin.

And we looked at several sites. And together picked the old railroad depot area because it was a great physical location for the city. It would help revitalize Upper King Meeting Street. It intercepted visitors before they got down into the deeper Historic District. And then worked carefully on the design. And it's been a huge success.

And, you know, when we started working on that, there were maybe 1.5 million visitors a year in Charleston. 1.7 million. Now we say there are 4 million. But I really feel that those irritants and negative components and pressures of tourism arguably are less now than they were. And it was because Frances and others, we got together and said where we are going to be in charge of where people... And that's why we passed, with the Foundation's support, the zoning

overlay to limit where hotels could go. Because we wanted them to go in a way where there would be pedestrian reinforcements.

If someone is staying in a hotel or an inn, they don't need to get in their car to go drive someplace. They can walk or take DASH.

KR: Hurricane Hugo, that's 16 years ago now, and its aftermath were really transformative for the city. Joe, you became more even more of a national figure at that time. But I'd love to hear some of your most vivid recollections, and it was certainly a point in time for this city. What the city -- how it has changed and the impact that Hurricane Hugo had on this city and you.

JR: Well, in discussing Hurricane Hugo, the most important element is a nonphysical one, it's a human one. And that was that we were successful in having people evacuate from low-lying areas. That was because when Hugo was over the worst hurricane this community perhaps had ever faced, that we did not have a huge loss of life. I think one person died in the city, six in county, and some of those had unfortunately decided to ride it out on a boat. But the loss of life, considering the impact of the storm, was very modest. And we successfully got people to shelter. The human aspect is the most important.

But from a physical standpoint, the morning after the eye passed, we left City Hall. It was about 5:30 in the morning. It was just dawning. The wind had subsided enough where it was safe to go out. Remember, it happened at night, so no one really knew what you would see. And we got out, the wind was still blowing, it was safe. And then a truck -- there was a lot of debris in front of City Hall, including the roof of City Hall. But I went down, went west on Broad Street and turned up King the wrong way, but obviously no one around. And when I saw the pieces of brick and masonry parts of building in the street, then I knew that our community would be waking up, or would be returning to a sight that they weren't prepared for.

One thing that we all worked on very hard, and the Foundation was very important in this, was the ethic that we were going to rebuild, but we were going to respect the quality of materials and we weren't going to let our guard down. We didn't tell somebody they couldn't get going. But we told them that this wasn't an opportunity to ease up or let up the integrity of the Historic District, and its buildings and its materials were very important. And everybody worked real hard on that. And there are wonderful stories of slate coming in from Wales and everything else.

But we had a few billion dollars' worth of damage in the community. And when you add it all up, much more than that in reconstruction because what a natural disaster does is... And just parenthetically, a natural disaster accelerates trends in place. So if the trend is diminishing, a natural disaster sadly accelerates the demise. If the trend is acceleration, the natural disaster or improvement can accelerate that.

So, since Charleston was in the process of restoration, it then causes someone, they've got damage on this historic home or building or church, and things are looking up. So you're not going to just repair that damage, you're going to go ahead and do some more. You'd been thinking about doing it, and you're optimistic about the future. So the result was that the

disastrous event that we would never wish for, and prayed never happens again, did, because of all the work that people had done. Preservation leaders, the Foundation's previous administration, all the what was happening or getting ready to happen in Charleston, Hugo might have been a positive fueling of that restoration. And it did.

And Charleston is more beautiful, and the buildings in better condition than really any time in its history, except maybe when some of the buildings were first built.

KR: One of your most prominent initiatives as mayor has been, speaking of shelter as you did with Hurricane Hugo, has been the push for affordable housing. Where do you see that fitting in to importance in your administration and its future?

JR: Well, affordable housing is so important anywhere. But it's very important in a history city. Because you want the city to always be a real and a just place. And that means it's a place for everyone. A place for everyone to live. If you restore an old city in the world and the end result is that average folks don't live there anymore, then the reality and the justice of the city has been lost. So our determination to provide and keep providing affordable housing was not only for those people to have good place to live, but to make sure that Charleston over time has everybody sharing it.

You build a beautiful Waterfront Park. It's really not as nice a park if only very affluent people have access to it. It's a nicer park when you can go out there and you see a cross-section of the community using it. And it's very hard. We're working even as we speak now in 2005 with new affordable housing initiatives. But that's why. We want Charleston now, 50 years from now, 100 years from now, to still contain places where people of modest resources live and join in the celebration of the great place that they have.

KR: And How do you see that affordable housing and preservationists can work together in this history city?

JR: Well, affordable housing and preservation have worked together very well. The preservation movement in Charleston envisioned helping restore neighborhoods for people who had [00:24:57 been stood] in them. The Historic Charleston Foundation's own homeownership initiative, we worked with the Foundation on the East Side. And it's always a house by house initiative. And in many of our areas that were more modest, or poorer neighborhoods in the Peninsula, were neighborhoods where the buildings were 1880, 1890, some older. But in [00:25:29 Mirawing], the single houses are smaller, but the same DNA, if you will, was there. And so to work together to restore those for people of modest resources was a win-win for everyone. And then I'm very proud of the engagement of the preservation movement in that.

KR: As we enter this new century, I guess we're five years in, what are your thoughts on the future of new construction within the Historic District?

JR: The future of what?

KR: Of new construction, of buildings within the Historic District.

JR: The new construction in the Historic District is a very difficult challenge because you've got to make it right. And there isn't a formula to make that happen. It really requires good owners and good architects, and good BARs, good preservation organizations all working together. And it's a tough one. I wish I could say, well, all you need to do is this, but you don't. And the matter of style and of the design is a complicated one.

On the one hand, we don't want Charleston in these new buildings to look like we were afraid to do anything but try to make it look like an old building. There's a real danger of phoniness to develop from that.

On the other hand, a building that wants to be in your face with the historic surroundings is just as bad. It's a matter of good design. Less than it is a matter of style, it's a matter of good materials. And it's a matter of correct scale and respecting the adjacencies, making it fit in.

We have the opportunity to do as we have done in other aspect of preservation because it is, it's a preservation issue. We have the opportunity to show the world how to do it very well. But it's one of those things that will require the intensity and energy that the preservation movement has shown in Charleston in the past to make it right.

KR: On a related subject, your urban design initiative and its translation to other cities. How do you feel that that has been effective?

JR: Well, the Mayors Institute for City Design has now touched over 600 mayors in our country. And so you could say that there's a little bit of Charleston inspiration all over America. I once told Andres Duany, the great architect and town planner, that he had been very influential to me, a mentor, something like that. He said, "No, Joe." He said, "Your teacher has been your city." And how true that was.

Having grown up here, you know, my feelings about the built environment are so strongly shaped by this extraordinary city. So, I feel like the Mayors Institute of City Design has given me the opportunity in talking about our experiences here, and preservation, and an urbanism. Charleston is a great preservation example for the country. But it is a great urbanism example. How buildings fit, relate to human beings. And how buildings and uses, and streets and sidewalks, and scale and material, and color and reality, how all of that works.

And the Mayors Institute of City Design has really let Charleston give that kind of inspiration to large and small cities all over the country.

KR: Great answer. I want to go back a little bit to Frances Edmunds, who for 40 years headed this organization, and your earliest and best recollections of Frances and her involvement with the city, with you, in various projects.

JR: Well, Frances Edmunds was one of the most remarkable people I have ever known. I knew her as a young person growing up as parent of friends. I knew her daughters, they're younger than I am, they will be quick to tell you. But she was a prominent figure in preservation.

And as a child, you know, you got to remember that that was not quite as popular as it is now. The Historical Society and all these people that don't want Charleston to ever make progress and all that. So, I saw her at this kind of very strong figure, but somewhat removed.

And then when I was elected, I got the chance to see this, as I said, one of the most extraordinary people I've ever known. She was so smart. And she was a big thinker. She was a steel magnolia if ever there was one. She was charming, beautiful, but strong. And you would never back Frances down. Not that I ever tried to. But I mean she wouldn't, you know, no one scared her.

Yet, there was a charm and graciousness about her that kept her from being, for those who were contesting something, from being an aggressive opponent to being someone that in the fine analysis, they had to work with. She was remarkable.

I think, obviously, she came to the position not formally trained, except taught by her city and by the world. Because she was a woman of world history. But she was remarkable. Her impact on the city is -- you cannot overstate it.

KR: I want to ask you now about the new Cooper River Bridge and the effect that you see it's having on this city in the future with all sorts of residential, commercial opportunities, particularly on the city side.

JR: The new Cooper River Bridge is going to have a huge impact on our community. It will open up opportunities for commerce and for ease of movement in the city and in the community. The bridges before were kind of barriers and made things more remote relatively, one from the other.

I also think that it's a very important kind of confidence enhancer. It's an engineering marvel. It was very costly. The money was found, a design problem that many thought couldn't be solved with a bridge that big. Span that wide. The largest cable stay in North America. So I think for the community, just a reminder that, you know, we can do what we set out to do. And in terms of construction, that we can make something contemporary quite beautiful.

KR: I want to ask you about the Livability Court, which we credit you with another initiative that's been, from our point of view, so successful. And part of the Livability Court in regard to preservation are the demolition by neglect cases that come before that. Could you speak to that a little bit, please?

JR: Well, the Livability Court is the result of this wonderful community seeking to find even better ways of doing things. And I think there will be cities all over the country that will have their own livability courts. Because it is in attending to those little details in the big scheme of things. But those little details are big problems if they're next to you in your neighborhood. Attending to those, and one of the real dangers in a community committed to preservation is demolition by neglect. That the owner doesn't want to fix it up, so they just don't do anything. Or you come back and, well, they have to fix this, but they're really not. They want it to just get so bad it has to go.

So, the roof keeps leaking. And over time, the beams are worthless. And so the Livability Court has given us even greater capacity to focus on that. And our demolition by neglect ordinance to let people know they're not going to do that anymore. They used to they could it many years ago, but they're not going to do that. You own a building in this historic city, and you don't have to own it, you can sell it. But if you own it, you have a responsibility to repair it and restore it. That's part of your citizenship in Charleston.

KR: The National Historic District, we've seen the district expand within the Peninsula City and moving up the peninsula. What do you see about future expansion of the National Historic District for the city?

JR: Are you speaking of the city thing, of the National Register District?

KR: The National Register.

JR: Well, and let me say this. I'm probably going to have to wrap this up to get on. But the delay, the amount of time this has taken is due to me, not to y'all. My answers are long. The National Register District in Charleston has been invaluable. It has given protections from the President's Advisory Council national resources and regulatory help. as well as just a further stamp of, this is nationally important. And I think that there are opportunities for growth as well.

We didn't extend it on the East Side because we were worried about the tax benefits there that could have created speculation in an area where we were very worried about gentrification. And the great thing about Charleston is, we have our own wonderful set of preservation protections. Our Board of Architecture review, our prohibition against demolition. And we took the old city district up to include most of anything close to old parts of the city. And then, of course, we're able to extend that beyond to pick up Lowndes Grove and the McLeod and other special places around the city. Those protections have been very important.

KR: Mayor Riley, we agree with Dick Jenrette, who says you're the best mayor in America. And your 30-year reign has been so fabulous as a preservation mayor, as an architectural mayor. And you've been honored so many times so appropriately. Are there any other things that you would like to say before we end. And specifically, is there anything you would like to say about Fritz Hollings? Maybe we could work that in.

JR: You know, the story of preservation success in Charleston is a very long and encompassing one. And we have been so fortunate in Charleston to have key visionary leaders like Dick Jenrette. You know, that he, so lucky for us, that he developed such an interest and affection for Charleston. And all that he did in restoring old buildings and helping build the Mills House, which was a critically important development.

Charles and Betty Woodward to me, and the fact that their love for Charleston. And then people like Fritz Hollings. I mean, Senator Hollings was always there for this community and preservation, and nationally for preservation. He was, I think, in his time, the most well-

respected member of the U.S. Senate. And you really can't write a history of preservation in Charleston without prominently featuring Fritz Hollings because he was so important.

KR: Any further commentary?

JR: No.

KR: That was so good.

JR: Well, thank you.

Male Voice: Thank you very much.

JR: Well, thank you all.

KR: We're so glad we made it into your schedule today.

JR: Well, you're so sweet.

KR: Thank you so, so much.

JR: Thank you. It's probably good I'm running out of time.

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