Historic Charleston Foundation Oral History Project

Interviewee: Joseph "Peter" McGee

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Interviewed by Historic Charleston Foundation staff members Jonathan Poston, Director of Museums and Preservation, and Kitty Robinson, Executive Director

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Begin Interview

JONATHAN POSTON: I'm Jonathan Poston, the director of the museums and preservation for the Historic Charleston Foundation, and we're here with the Foundation's executive director, Kitty Robinson, and we have with us today Joseph H. McGee, known as Peter McGee, Foundation former president, former Trustee of the National Trust, General Counsel for many years with Historic Charleston Foundation, and we are with Peter to ask him some reminiscences of his time with Historic Charleston Foundation and his life in Charleston.

Peter, you obviously were born and brought up in Charleston, South Carolina, and I think one of the first things that we'd like to ask you is, to describe, if you want to start with your family, and that situation, but to describe your childhood in Charleston.

JOSEPH McGEE: I was born in 1929. That was the year the Cooper River Bridge was completed and the stock market crashed. I have no recollection of either event. We lived, until I was married, I lived in a small single Charleston single house at the foot of King Street, number 4 King Street. I was an only child and lived with my father and mother. My father was a trust officer at a local bank. My mother was a housewife. My recollection goes back I suppose to about the time I was five or six years old. Charleston in those days, I think of as, it was black and white and gray. It wasn't very colorful. Most of the buildings needed to be painted, but there was a lot of run down conditions. You wouldn't recognize it almost if you returned back. Charleston went through a period after the Civil War, I don't mean to dwell on that but, economically this area was depressed for 60 or 70 years and didn't really begin to come out of it until World War II. As a small child living in Charleston it was a fun place to live. I loved it. At The Battery, as we always called it, White Point Gardens, that's a

fancy name. We called it The Battery. It was just a block from where I lived. And the children would go there every afternoon with their "das"[1], that's a word that is gone from the language. [Spells] "D-A" da was a nurse, I think it's a Gullah derivative. But I remember going down there in the afternoons. A lot of the houses that have been built since then, of course were empty lots. So we played on The Battery. My first thought of going to school was in a private, one-room school taught by Miss Sadie Jervey who lived a block from where I lived. And I went there two years with a student body of around fifteen people. The city was integrated in a way that has long since changed but there were Negro neighborhoods right in the midst of where the rest of us lived and that was part of the charm, in a way. For instance, Price's Alley. I bet there were six homes in there that were occupied by African Americans. There were other neighborhoods like that throughout the area. How do I go from there? Do you have a specific question?

JP: Well you talked about playing on The Battery, so Fort Sumter Hotel was there…

JM: Fort Sumter had been built in the twenties. It was a hotel that was probably the city's best hotel. My father was a close friend of the manager of the hotel and I felt like I owned that hotel because as a small boy I went in there. From the brink of my memory my father smoked cigars. He smoked a very expensive cigar that costs six cents and he would give me a nickel and a penny and send me down to the hotel to buy him a "something-Queen" cigar. I did that from practically the brink of my memory and I knew all the bellboys and the people that worked there and it was fun. And we would all go play football on The Battery. The first time I ever was arrested was for playing football on The Battery. The police pulled up, they took our names and scared us to death. They just turned around and threw it away right afterwards.

JP: It was illegal to play football?

JM: Well it was a passive park just as it is today. They wanted to discourage it. After two years at the city school I went to the Craft School, the elementary school, just above Broad on Legare. That was about a four or five block walk from where I lived. It was a good grammar school. I enjoyed it. The population, incidentally it's interesting to reflect on that. The city of Charleston then had as its northern boundary Mount Pleasant Street. It had not yet crossed the river and yet the population at that time was right at 70,000. There's a population of 30 or 40,000 now. It would have been about 70,000 [then]. The number of people that lived in that same area today is probably around 40 at most, so we've lost 30,000. And we lived in a more compact way than we do now. Migration to the suburbs occurred right after World War II.

KITTY ROBINSON: Peter, I have a question for you. You said that you walked to school. Did you ride a bike? Or did everybody walk more or drive?

JM: Kitty I rode a bicycle to school until I graduated from high school. Now sometimes I walked but I, even when I started first grade and went around the corner, I had a bicycle.

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[1]Gullah word for "mother," "grandmother" or "caregiver."

And I rode a bike to Craft School most of the time. Occasionally I would walk. I can remember getting in a couple of fights when I was walking so I only would walk sometimes.

KP: You picked certain paths to walk on.

JP: Peter, is it true, I used to hear Frances Edmunds say this, that people would come during summer from uptown Charleston to The Battery at night because it was a cooler spot? Is that true?

JM: It is absolutely true because remember, residential air conditioning did not really come in until the last thirty or forty years. The first building in Charleston to be air-conditioned was the Woolworth's Five and Ten Cent store and that was probably around, maybe 1940. Most of the businesses weren't air conditioned and certainly homes weren't, and living in Charleston in the summer was quite different than now for that reason. The screened porch which almost every house had was where you literally lived. You fought mosquitoes. I was kidding someone just the day before yesterday, with a fleck[?] gun. You pushed the darn thing, and you could try keep the mosquitoes down that way. Some people even slept under mosquito netting because they didn't have sufficient screen. But The Battery was where we went. Living where we did-- We went down there. My mother and father many a night would sit on those benches and enjoy the breezes. Charleston was a very ethnic neighborhood at that time. We had sizeable Jewish, sizeable Greek, sizeable Italian segments, Germans, and when you went to The Battery, and I can tell you to this day where the Greeks would be. And it was a lot of fun and there was a lot of laughter about it. And I also remember this, my parents telling me that it was considered improper for an expectant mother to be seen in public except at certain times and it was the custom for a husband to take his pregnant wife down to The Battery after dark. I remember clearly hearing about that. Palmer Gaillard is coming in here after me this afternoon. I can remember sitting on The Battery with my parents and Palmer's parents coming down and the two families talking. And Palmer's father was a little guy with a big voice and I can remember him cussing to this day about the New Deal and other things. So yes it was a wonderful meeting place and after dark it was a fun place with lots and lots of people from all over the city.

JP: Now, I've heard so many people reminisce about the condition of Charleston houses in that period. That even people who were more well-to-do, their houses tended to look, maybe, less than in a fine state of repair.

JM: Well that's absolutely true.

JP: Can you sort of describe that sort of quality about Charleston because it's something we really almost don't hear anything about?

JM: Well let me tell you about the house that I grew up in that I dearly loved. Incidentally, the house I'm about to describe is now on the market and I think I heard that they had a contract on it for over a million dollars. It blows my mind because that house sold for $16,000 in about 1963. That house had plumbing added long after the house was built. As a

result, the pipes were on the outside of the building, and if you drove around Charleston houses at that time and looked, you'd see the plumbing pipes frequently on the outside. There was no central heating in most houses; certainly we didn't have it. We had coal fires in two rooms and we had a Franklin-type oil-burning stove in the middle of the dining room that stuck out. The coal was delivered by the Johnson Coal Company and kept in a bin in the yard. And the grates were cleaned out and re-lit every morning. Kitchens -- my mother had a marble top table which was her pride and joy. We didn't have cupboards at that time but most houses had pantries. A pantry was a closed, dark closet in which you kept all of your staples and it had a wonderful smell to it. So bread was kept in the bread box. The houses were in bad repair for the most part. The steps that led up to our kitchen had no rails on them, no balusters on them, and that wouldn't even pass the code today. And it was not unusual to see houses that were in very bad repair.

JP: Such as the great houses on The Battery, that's where we've heard they were in fairly mixed states.

JM: Yeah, well I'd say that "mixed" is the word. The great houses-- You'd have to go by them one by one. Each one of them has a certain memory. Mrs. Washington Roebling lived in the Gibbes house, and of course she was very, very wealthy. And Dick Jenrette's Roper House at that time was owned by Mr. Guggenheim who was an enormously wealthy industrialist. The Edmundston-Alston House was the home of Mrs. J. J. Pringle Smith. You could go through each one as to who lived there and what the conditions were but what wealth there was set in some of those large houses.

JP: Yes, I see that.

KR: Peter, I have a question for you, again back to walking. My question this time is about King Street. Is that where your mother would shop, on King Street?

JM: Yes. Let me first mention grocery stores. The first supermarket came to Charleston, and I remember this because my father in his position at the bank had really brought it here. It was a Big Star. That was the name of it, Big Star. It was located way up on King Street and though I can close my eyes and see it, when I go there today I have to struggle to figure out exactly where it was. It was up about Spring I'm sure. Before then grocery stores were small corner stores, usually run by-- The Germans had stores, the Greeks had stores. Far and away, the most important grocery store, and it was an institution, was the Ohlandt store at the corner of Warren and Meeting Street, run for generations by the Ohlandt family. They had a lot of trucks. They had a fleet of trucks. They had their own wonderful warehouse which is now a restaurant at the corner of East Bay and Queen Street. And they did not only a walk-in business but also a terrific telephone business. My mother ordered her meat from the Avenue Meat Market on Rutledge Avenue at the corner of Cannon Street. And on the weekend I can hear her call down: "This is Mrs. J.H. McGee at 4 King Street. What sort of roast do you have?" I'd say, "Mother, do you ever think the guys would say the roast is lousy?" Whatever you want he's going to say 'it's great.'" Shortly thereafter, the bicycle delivery boy would deliver the meat for the weekend. Laundry was delivered to and from the house. We had, at the corner of Church and, correction, at the corner of King and

Tradd Street there was a fruit store run by Mr. Drake, two bakery stores, and a filling station. All of that right downtown at the corner of Tradd and King. So Kitty, to answer your question, it was quite different. There were lots of stores, many of them run by families and in a good many instances, the families lived above the store.

KR: Do you remember visitors in your childhood, tourists, visitors, people coming to visit Charleston?

JM: They came at two times. There was the first group that came for the winter months, primarily January and February, and they seemed to primarily stay at the Villa Margherita, which is at the corner of South Battery and Church Street, or at the Fort Sumter Hotel. And as a little boy going into the Fort Sumter Hotel, I can remember seeing them sitting there reading their *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* which were inevitably out of date. And a portion of the building they call the sunroom, they'd sit in there. And this was a wealthy group of Northerners who would come down, for I'd say several weeks. Then the tourist season, as it was called, was of course in April when the azaleas were in bloom. We would all notice at that time that tourists were in town because we'd notice the out-of-state license plates. The Azalea Festival was a very big deal and that was probably I guess in the middle of April. It was not a success at all but it was a lot of fun. As a child, I thought the kickoff parade at two o'clock on a Monday afternoon in April or maybe March, I think April, was just the most wonderful parade I'd ever seen.

KR: Peter, I want to ask you too about, this is growing up again, but where did you go swimming? Did you go to the country or to the islands on weekends?

JM: I don't ever remember anyone swimming in the harbor, although some people did. Palmer Gaillard will probably tell you about it. I know that they had done that but we never did. And our parents didn't want us to because they considered that the harbor was contaminated. Of course there were times that we would, but not often. The beaches were then as now a wonderful place to go. My family didn't have a place on Sullivan's Island, but I wanted one, and that was my greatest wish to have a house on Sullivan's Island. When I finally bought one on my fortieth birthday I thought I had really made it big time. We enjoyed that house so much. But I had a lot of friends who had places in Sullivan's Island. We'd go there whenever we could and had a grand time on the beach.

JP: Did you still take the streetcar that went out there, Peter? Wasn't there a streetcar that ran out-- ?

JM: Streetcars were replaced by buses and I can remember exactly when it happened because it was a big deal. I was young enough that it was exciting to see the bus drive by on South Battery. The streetcar had gone down King Street and turned around at the foot of-- correction I said King-- . It went down Meeting Street, all the way to South Battery, and then turned around and came back up. That was the only streetcar below Broad. I remember taking the streetcar as a child, but when it changed over to the bus, gosh, that must have been when I was about five or six. But I do remember that the older boys on King Street, they would tie a rope across the street because the streetcar, of course, took its electricity

from the overhead wires, and it had a boom or mast that established contact. When they strung the rope across the street, it would knock it down and cut off the electricity and the streetcar which was then dead in its tracks. But by the time I was old enough to do that they'd been replaced by buses. Gaillard can tell you all about that. That's the third time I've mentioned him. I've really given him a preview.

JP: We'll have to ask him that question.

KR: Were you allowed to ride the buses and streetcars by yourself?

JM: After a certain age, yeah. Particularly I remember riding the bus to go see the Citadel football games. Gosh I don't think I've ridden a bus in the city of Charleston in twenty-five years.

JP: Peter, you have had relationship with Historic Charleston Foundation, I won't say since the beginning but since nearly the beginning of the Foundation. I wonder if you'd tell us how that started and how it evolved.

JM: John before we do that, you had a question you were going to ask me about the tornado.

JP: Oh yes, I'm so sorry.

JM: Let's do that because I saw that question and I was thinking about it and I'd like to tell you about that. The tornado hit Charleston on September the, I'm going to say the 28th, that's not far off, 1938. I was nine years old and I was in the fifth grade at Craft School. It was in the morning, early in the morning, and as was custom in my family, and I think in most families, we'd have a sit-down breakfast of hominy. It wasn't grits; it was hominy. And we had it every morning of the year. And then I went upstairs, frankly I went to the bathroom, in preparation for leaving to the school. And it was about five minutes after eight, and I say that because I think I've since read that that's when the thing hit. And it was a loud noise that I was at first convinced was a big truck racing down King Street. And I went and put my eyes down at the sill level to look out the window to see what was coming and the dust suddenly came in between the sash and sill and hit me in the eyes with such force that I got sand in my eyes. And the noise intensified to where it was like an airplane that was roaring down. It was at once scary and at the same time, exhilarating. I would later say that it was the most exciting, fun, wonderful day of my life. It was over in a matter of seconds really. I don't suppose it lasted more than maybe ten seconds. We knew something terrible had happened. My mother went downstairs and came back up almost in tears. My mother, I never saw her shed tears, but she was close to it. And I can remember so vividly what she said, "Oh my garden is ruined!" And my father said, this is so clear in my mind, he said, "Your garden is ruined? Look out the window, Thead[?] Cheshire's house is ruined!" Thead[?] Cheshire lived at the corner of King and Lamboll, in the house where Emerson Reid now lives, and when you looked out, the third floor bedroom had collapsed. Shortly thereafter we learned that Frankie Rhett, Frances Cheshire Rhett, his lifelong friend, had been in the bed asleep, and she heard the noise and got out of that bed, and moments after she got out of that bed, the ceiling came in and crushed the bed to the floor. As it quieted

down, the first thing was, I announced that "I wasn't going to school today" and my family agreed, and that was a big deal in itself because, without trying to, I had not missed a day in school in three years. But I was going to miss this one because it there was too much excitement going on. We afterwards learned that they were three tornadoes that came across within moments of each other. The one that we were involved with crossed from James Island, crossed the Ashley River, came in crossing-- We lived as I said on King Street and the force of the storm came right across from a little bit to the west of where the hotel is, the Fort Sumter, right on through a swath that went up to St. Michael's Church and across into the Market. The biggest damage that was done was to the east end of the Market Street where a number of buildings were destroyed. I think there were somewhere around ten to fifteen people killed. I didn't learn it until the next day but the father of one of my Craft school classmates worked as a gardener and he had been on Ladson Street when this tornado struck and a shingle off one of the roofs had hit him in the head and killed him. Wires were down everywhere. A great state of confusion. And we spent the whole day walking around, looking at the damage, talking to people. And it was a vivid memory that I obviously have never forgotten. It was of course a tragic thing, the loss of life, the terrible property damage, in a city that didn't have much money. Our house came through fairly well but the tin roof had been blown off. To repeat, it was, for me, not only a memorable, but a very exciting day. So there's more than you ever wanted to know about the tornado.

JP: I assume that in the way you describe three, it only affected three different pockets, so otherwise the city was unscathed.

JM: That's right, if you sketched where the tornadoes came across, it was like three fingers cutting across.

JP: Peter, maybe before we do ask you about your Foundation involvement we ought to ask you about the rest of your public service, which was a term or so on City Council and also in the Legislature.

JM: I served three terms on the state legislature from 1963 to 1968, six years, three two-year terms. And one four-year term I served on City Council from 71 to 75.

JP: Can you tell us a little about what that was like? What the issues and political climate (inaudible)--

JM: I did the Legislature first. I enjoyed that. The story I've told a zillion times-- When I was running the first time, an old friend who was very experienced in politics gave me some advice that I've never forgotten. He said, "If you're elected, and at the end of the first two-year term, no matter how much you dislike it, run again. You owe it to the people. You won't be worth a damn during your first two years; you won't even know what you're doing, and no matter how much you dislike it, run again. If you're re-elected at the end of your second term, and you still don't like it, go ahead and quit. If you do like it, run a second term. At the end of your third term, no matter how much you like it, *stop*. Because if you don't, it will take you over and you'll never be worth a damn as a lawyer again and you'll just be a politician the rest of your life." Well that's exactly the way it played out in my case.

I didn't know what was going on the first two years. Then at the second term I got on a committee I wanted and became vice chair of the committee and started to learn the ropes. And then the third term, I was active. I sponsored legislation, served on committees, and got real involved with it. And the chairman of my judiciary committee came to me towards the end of my last year and he said, "I'm going to run for lieutenant governor, and you can step up and be chairman of the judiciary committee." And I just had these dreams: chairman of the judiciary committee, and then he runs for lieutenant governor and what do I do? And I said, "uh-uh, this is great, but I'm getting out of here." I never ever regretted the service, but I never ever regretted the decision to get out when I did. I ran because as a young lawyer it was an opportunity for me to get better known, but the participation in the legislative process was an education, and it was a great pleasure. I enjoyed it. I saw things I didn't like and I saw things I didn't approve of. But by and large we had good state government. We had excellent people at the top. We did accomplish some things. If there was one thing that bothered me more than anything else it was too durn slow, too much procrastination and dragging their feet. But, to repeat, it was a good experience.

KR: Were you opposed in your elections?

JM: Kitty, at that time the election was entirely different. There what we called "at-large elections." And Charleston County had eleven members of the house delegation. Those eleven people were elected at-large from the entire county. When you campaigned, as we used to say, you'd have to campaign from the Santee River to the Edisto River. And my first year only fifteen people ran so you had to be in the top eleven which, is that right? Maybe there were only thirteen? That's right, three people, because I'm getting confused as to how many people didn't make it. But the first time I ran I remember I was one of five newcomers. The rest were all incumbents, and three of the five were going to make it and two were not. So I was running to not be one of those two that didn't make it. Then, after I was out, the process was completely revised as a result of the U.S. Supreme Court's decisions, first affecting the Senate and then affecting the House with the so-called one man, one vote rule. Since then we've had single-member districts, which I happen to think has resulted in perhaps a more democratic representation but it certainly has changed the type of person that used to go up. We had a lot of young-- I was typical, a lot of young people who wanted to go up for two to three years and come back. That's not the case anymore.

KR: Peter, I think that two things that we'd really like to hear you talk about before our time runs out, and one of them is Ansonborough in the 1950s and Ansonborough today where you live, and the other, of course, which we started on before, was your involvement with the Foundation and the highlights therein.

JM: John, you asked me that question earlier and I sidetracked it on to the tornado.

JP: Glad you did.

JM: Well my first involvement with the start of the Historic Charleston Foundation was when I was in the Navy in 1964 [sic], I guess it was. I was on a ship in the Pacific and I had

given my father power of attorney over my checking account to have him do things for me, and he wrote me a letter and said he had wrote a check for ten dollars from my account to give to Historic Charleston Foundation which was trying to raise money to buy the Russell House, and everybody was pitching in and he knew I would want to. And I wrote back and told him I wasn't the least bit interested in contributing ten dollars to the purchase of the Russell House. I was single, and in the Navy and I was at sea and I had a lot better things to do with my money than that!

JP: You said that was 1954?

JM: Well I was on the Wasp from July '53 to July of '55 (inaudible)-- two years. I think it was even in springtime. My next involvement with Historic Charleston Foundation and really first involvement, came in about 1964. I was a lawyer with the firm of Moore and Muzon. I had been practicing, what, about six years I guess. Maybe six or seven years. And Frances Edmunds came to call on me. I'd known her all my life-- I'd known the Smyth family-- And she came up and said that they wanted to get someone to do a study of the zoning laws and was I interested in doing it? She told me what she had in mind, and she in her typical fashion, she said, "We have a budget, we have three thousand dollars and that's all we're going to pay you and this is what would expect you to do." So I told her I would, another decision I never regretted, I enjoyed it completely. I was slow getting started. And I remember a couple people said, "Have you got [sic] started on that?" Well I did finally get started after a couple of months. It was an interesting study. At that time the zoning laws as they applied to preservation were few and far between. Charleston, of course, had been the first city in 1932-- A man named, I want to say Jacob Morrison from New Orleans, had wrote [sic] a book that was about that thick [indicates]. I went down to New Orleans and met with him, No, I met with him somewhere else but I think we went to New Orleans. But I did a study and we came up with recommendations for changes both in the law and how the Board of Architectural Review was to be composed, and the areas affected. One the main points that I came up with was with-- By that time, there was good and sufficient authority that the zoning laws that could prevent demolition. Prior to that time you couldn't prevent demolition. So that was my first introduction. We worked with the City, the laws were changed as we suggested. I think we got just about every one we wanted through. Then, in 1968, I guess it was, shortly thereafter, I was enormously flattered to be asked to come on the board of trustees for the Foundation. And about the same time that that was getting kicked up, I was involved with the State of South Carolina's 300th birthday, the tricentennial. I was the vice-chairman of the commission, and Charleston was the center of it. Frances was very much involved in that. She and I did a number of things together. We organized the movement to persuade the National Trust to hold its annual meeting in Charleston in the fall of 1970. And so that's how my relationship with the Foundation started.

JP: Peter, what was the leadership of the foundation like, other than, of course, Frances, in terms of those on the board who were most active?

JM: When I came on the board, Ben Scott Whaley was the president. He served as president of Historic Charleston I think for around ten or twelve years. Frances was the first

Executive Director, and she of course stayed until she was seventy. The office was in the third floor of the Russell House and her office was in the large oval room. We referred to her office as "the oval room." I could spend a lot of time talking about Frances and how well we-- I can come back to that. The staff then consisted of three or four people I suppose. There was a programs person who may have been a Alicia Walker Rudolph at that time, or maybe it was somebody before her (inaudible)-- John, you came in-- Weren't you the first person in your position?

JP: No, Greg Paxton.

JM: Greg Paxton! Sure, I remember him, of course. I think I was on the search committee. I can remember meeting Frances and I and a couple others and taking him to lunch, and taking you to lunch.

JP: Probably.

JM: The staff grew from there.

JP: And the Foundation was primarily then concerned with Ansonborough still and maybe with moving beyond Ansonborough--

JM: Right, right, you asked about Ansonborough. Let me go back to that. My first real recollection of Ansonborough was the summer 1942. I went to, what did they call it, Vacation Bible School at the Second Presbyterian Church on Charlotte Street. I rode the bicycle every day out there for three weeks I guess. And I had mapped out an easy way to ride my bicycle to avoid the traffic and I went from my house on King Street, up to Broad somehow. Then I went on Church Street, then to Market, toAnson, and rode through Anson Street all the way up to Elizabeth Street to the church. And as I rode through Ansonborough right up Anson Street where I now live, I remember thinking at the time, it was the summer of '42 so I was thirteen, that I didn't know that street very well. I had probably driven through it a few times, but I didn't know it very well. And I looked at it and was surprised at what large handsome buildings there were but they were in bad shape, and I didn't know anybody that lived there. Ansonborough was at that time, I didn't know it back then but I know it now, it had an amazing number of corner grocery stores, I think nine of them in this small neighborhood. It seemed like at each corner there was a grocery store. There were lots of ethnic groups there. There was a large Black population that lived in the area where the auditorium is now. That's another subject we might or might not have time to get into. But there were German families. The house that we now live in was at that time, but I of course we didn't know it, was owned by one of Charleston's most prominent African-American families. It was a man that owned a fish market. And his daughter, who never married, was living in that house by herself. And Herbert DeCosta, who you're going to interview next, will tell you all about Miss Leslie who was a relative of his. And Herbert and his company restored that house for the couple who bought it before we owned it and he can tell you all about that. The Foundation's role in Ansonborough was certainly one of the highlights of its 56 year of existence. It was an extraordinary success. And I can remember, another specific recollection: Frances Edmunds came in and said, "This is a

secret. We are buying six houses in Ansonborough and we are putting them in the names of individuals before we let it out that we're doing it." And I became involved with the preparation of the deed and my name is even on a deed conveying the house I now live in as a witness and it was bought by one of the trustees just purely in his name. Then after they had acquired the six houses, it may have been five or it may have been seven, you'd know that [indicating Poston], they were all conveyed, of course, to the trust, to the Foundation, Historic Charleston. And it was made public what the Foundation had in mind. Then they proceeded to acquire other houses, some they sold right away with easements and restrictions. Some they invested money in re-doing and renovating to a certain extent. The success of that, it was scary at first, it didn't just bloom right away. It took a few years. But it was an unqualified success and it really was of national significance. And it's one of the many things that I think Frances Edmunds gets the original credit, and so much of the hands-on work that she did. Today as we all know, Ansonborough is a very nice neighborhood and the values of the properties up there are beyond belief.

KR: Peter, Ansonborough is such a marvelous success story for Frances and the trustees of the Foundation. Are there other things that come to your mind as outstanding achievements of the Foundation?

JM: I think the Foundation has played vital roles in several related but really different activities. One of them I'd like to talk about first is the watchdog role that the Foundation has played with reference to the city's planning and zoning department, with the meetings of the Board of Architectural Review and the Board of Adjustment. When Frances was the director and when I first became involved, that was certainly one of her most important activities. She attended those meetings. She investigated. She was the spokesman. Then as the foundation became larger, other people began helping her then. Of course now, other people do it. John, you have done it for years. But that was one of the most important things to do certainly. I think another thing the Foundation, we should always mention, is its role in developing the Festival of Houses and Gardens. It is so well run and it's done so beautifully that it has brought in after these fifty years, I think you've seen millions of people in this city over that period of time. But not only has it been the economic lifeline for the Foundation, but it has been a keystone in the development of the tourist economy in this city. Another area is when the Foundation has stepped in to save specific buildings. It has in some instances bought those properties to be sure that they would not be developed in what the Foundation thought was an improper way. Mulberry comes to mind. The Gibbes House. Other properties. Another instance where I think we're successful, and I like to tell the story because it involves me I guess, is there was a terrific hue and cry over the proposed addition to the Federal Courthouse building, the Post Office building at the corner of Broad and Meeting Street. And they came out with a proposal to enlarge it by building along Meeting Street a building that was not well thought out, we thought. A suit was actually commenced. We'd got into a terrific brouhaha with the Federal government, the GSA. And those of us involved with the Foundation met and came up with a proposal and I had the assignment of going to see the Federal judge who was Sol Blatt. He was then holding court in Columbia. And I drove up to Columbia and we went out to lunch. And I said, "Sol, I have an idea and I want you to see if you could live with this." I had already been over this with Frances ahead of time and I took a paper napkin and sketched out on it

what we thought they ought to do. I kind of held my breath thinking he might get angry with me for this and he said, "Do you think the preservation community in Charleston would support that?" I said, "Well I can't speak for everybody but the answer is I think so." And he said, "Well I like it and I tell you what. You go and you see what you can do, and if you can come back and look me in the eye and say that all the people that you're involved will support it, then I'll do my best to get the GSA to support it." So we went back and met with the mayor on a Saturday. It was in the summer and he was over at his house up on Isle of Palms. And he said "I think it's a good idea. I can go with it." We worked with the Preservation Society and others. And I went back and said, "We're on board." And it took him a little longer. He had to go to Washington, and I'm not sure where but he came back, and he went ahead and did it just using just the footprint that Historic Charleston Foundation had suggested to him. And I think it's been a happy solution. The addition fits in well and it looks good. That's one that comes to mind. Then there's the Reproductions program. I know you'll interview Tommy Thornhill at some time and that's his special interest. He deserves an enormous amount of credit for the development of that program so I'll let him tell you all about that. And there are other activities of the Foundation.

KR: Peter, I have a feeling our time is--

JP: There is something that I'd like to ask you about. You mentioned the National Trust Meeting in Charleston in 1970 and I was wondering if you'd tell us a little bit about your relationship with the National Trust and about that meeting because most-- The National Trustees Meetings we go to today are nothing like the ones that were held in those days in sheer size and also I think intimacy--

JM: Well it was an absolutely delightful time. It was October of 1970, it was the City's and the State's tricentennial birthday. And the Trust came here and the Mills House, or the Mills-Hyatt House as it was then known, had just opened, barely opened in time. That was the brainchild of Dick Jenrette and that, of course, is important. Historic Charleston Foundation was completely involved in that. That's one of the important things we did was to help foster that badly needed hotel. It was completed just in time
for the Trust to arrive. They had about, my recollection is, eleven to twelve hundred people in attendance which was its largest annual meeting at that time. The Junior League was very much-- It was one of the sponsoring organizations, and they planned-- You were probably involved, Kitty--

KR: Yes Peter, I was.

JM: And they had the Trustees. First there was something in Washington Park. And then we blocked off, did we block off Chalmers Street and use Chalmers?

JP: I think Dotty Kerrison said it was a luncheon in the park--

JM: That's right! There was a luncheon in Washington Park!

JP: With real silver. Everybody had to bring their silver.

JM: Oh! It was done to the tees. It was a wonderful group of people and the Trustees had some very wonderful nationally known people on the Board then and it was great fun having them here. We put on a program in the auditorium and there were four speakers who told the Charleston story. And it was Frances Edmunds, Peter Manigault, George Rogers, and me. And it was great fun putting on that program for them. Then we had a conspiracy going too about Drayton Hall. We wanted to persuade the National Trust that Drayton Hall was worthy of being a National Trust property and that they ought to try to get it and we, meaning Historic Charleston Foundation, would help. And Frances cooked up a scheme that the Trustees would be taken to Drayton Hall and then we would spring it on them that, "Isn't this a wonderful place?" And don't you think that it just worked beautifully! The Trustees were all taken out there and they were enthralled with the place and when we afterwards said, "Now don't you think," the Trust leadership said, "Yes we do." And from that event, a series of steps took place that, I think it was about three years before they finally did it, but of course the National Trust did acquire Drayton Hall with the help of the state of South Carolina and this Foundation. And many of the people at the Trust will tell you that they consider Drayton Hall the flagship of their fleet of properties. The meeting in 1970 was, I think, a great success. Frances received the award, the Crowninshield Award, the very next year, I think, in San Diego. And then we decided that we ought to make a rule, let's bring them back twenty years later. So when the clock ran and we realized it was getting on to 1990, we went to the Trust and said, "We'd like you to come back." And they did come back in 1990 and that was another annual meeting and I think it went well too. And now 2010 isn't too far away. I hope somebody will not forget about that and that they'll be back in that year.

KR: Peter, who was on that 1990 panel for the Trust. Were you part of that one? Was it Dick Jenrette?

JP: I believe you were not involved in the 1990--

JM: Oh, in 1990 we did things differently. There was a program at the Riviera Theatre.

KR & **JP**: Sottile.

JM: No. The Riviera.

JP: That's right. You're absolutely right.

JM: It was a panel discussion among five winners of the Crowninshield Award and I was the moderator. And I remember that it was the first really beautiful day we'd had. We'd started off with pouring rain on Thursday afternoon and I remember my first words were that I had been placed in charge of weather for that day and Charles Duell was responsible for Thursday's weather.

KR: [Laughs] And that was right after the hurricane.

JM: It was a year later.

JP: And I remember that James Marston Fitch and St. Claire Wright were also on that panel.

JM: St. Claire Wright was on that panel and I probably shouldn't tell you this but I do it with great affection and admiration for her. It was just amusing. She had a wonderful lecture, a dog and pony show as we used to say, a slideshow. And we said, "That's not what we want now. This is going to be a panel discussion and we want you to answer the questions that are asked." Of course she was going to get into that show of hers with the slides and the history of Annapolis, and she did it. And who is the person I used to call the "keeper of the keys" with the Department of the Interior?

JP: Bill Murtaugh.

JM: Bill Murtaugh was on the panel. And he said, "What you have here today is the cutting edge of senility." And we had a good time with that. And my wife Patty was on the Board of Advisors of the National Trust and she was the chairman of the Trust committee for the annual meeting, and for one year before they came here, it would be at least once a month, somebody would come into town and usually stayed in our house. But that was Patty's doing, I just watched and listened.

JP: Thinking of you and Patty, and all the people you've entertained and all that you've done for Charleston, I think one last thing that we ought to ask you about is Spoleto, because you both have been so involved with Spoleto over the years, particularly when you lived next door to the Dock Street Theater and hosted an after-chamber-music soiree every day it seemed like through chamber music season. Can you just say a word about Spoleto and what you think it's meant to Charleston? And what it's meant to you?

JM: I have nothing but praise for it. I have nothing but praise for the people who brought it here and for those who've kept it here. It had some very, very difficult hurdles to clear at the beginning and some even higher hurdles to clear later on when several problems arose with the founding director, Gian Carlo Menotti. Again I have to say Frances Edmunds, she was right at the beginning of the first meeting held at Rufus Barkley's house when those of us who went there didn't know what it was all about. And we found that they had this idea of this festival. Joe Riley was the mayor and certainly was an enormous force working to bring it here. Ted Stern was involved. And it came and from the very start it was a success as far as participation and the quality of programs, and I'm delighted to see now they have their own headquarters and it seems to be really doing so well. And I just think it's one of the many wonderful things that have happened here in the last so many years.

JP: Who was your favorite guest when you would host those receptions at your house for Spoleto?

JM: Favorite guest?

JP: Yes, I know there were many. Or maybe one or two?

JM: [Laughs] Oh gosh that's a tough one. I got fed up with those parties because they worked me too durn hard. I remember once Patty called me at the office and said, "I think you better come here." And I said, "I don't want to go to that damn thing." I said, "No." The day before we had been to a one-man production at the Dock Street Theater called "Old Herbacious." It was a *wonderful* show! And she said, "The actor is here." I dropped what I was doing and was racing around. And we had a delightful-- I bet I talked to that man for half hour about the glorious production that he did and it was so much fun to meet him. But that happened a lot.

KR: Peter, we are unable to interview Frances at this time and I wondered if you just might make some comments about Frances in our last few moments?

JM: [Chuckling] How much time do I have?

KR: You don't have much.

JM: I've known Frances all my life. Her father was one of my many mentors for whom I have great affection. Frances was a wonderful person. You have to speak of her in the past and that is so, so sad. She had a steel-trap mind. She had a temper. She called it as she saw it, but she was invariably on point right far more than she was wrong. I found her very easy to work with. Not everybody did. I guess I was lucky in that way. But she was-- I was asked to introduce her six years ago and I gave it so much thought, and I came up with something that I said. This sort of wraps up the way I feel about her. I said, "What Ulysses was to the Greek army outside the walls of Troy. What J. Edward Hoover was to the FBI. And what Michael Jordan was to the Chicago Bulls. So Frances Edmunds was to Historic Charleston Foundation." And that's the way I feel about her.

JP: Peter, thank you so much.

JM: We're through?

Camera crew: That was awesome.

END OF INTERVIEW