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Mr. Leon DeValinger

[0:00:00]

Mr. DeValinger: This is a continuation of my recollections for the University of Delaware oral history project in which I'm working with Mrs. Button *[phonetic]* [0:00:16]. And this recording is being made at 10:45 am on Friday, May 21st, 1976.

At the end of the recording session previously, I was talking about the Robinson House at Newman's familiarly known as the Newman's Tea House.

The people of the Claymont area were very much concerned about the preservation of this historic property as it was being threatened by either a commercial development or a widening of the road. Fortunately we were able to acquire the property after a long period of negotiations. This was made possible by the interest and activity of representative LESHER, L-E-S-H-E-R of our Delaware general assembly.

He was successful in getting an appropriation of \$87,000 to carry on this work. The work did not proceed as quickly as I'm narrating it due to the fact that it took quite a while to get the general assembly to appropriate the funds. And we were continually having custodial problems there. In other words, vandals in the area, who were breaking in almost as soon as we would board up the doors and windows.

We were using our own workforce to change the plumbing and the electrical lines which needed to be changed for our purposes from the ones that had existed for the tea house. And our men would come to work on Monday and find that over the weekend. The house have been broken into. The copper pipe that we'd put in have been cut out and the same was true of electrical lines being installed.

A considerable amount of time elapsed before the program was able to go forward. And what we were doing was maintaining it against this type of vandalism, planning our work and negotiating for phases of the contracting that was to be done.

Meanwhile toward the end of 1970, it became apparent that the administration of Governor Peterson was not sympathetic to our work. He had reorganized our public archives commission into a cabinet division under the Secretary of State. And it's soon became evident that I

was to be displaced. I've learned that since my departure from my old position that contracts have been left and the work is going forward at the Newman's.

Another historic restoration that I would like to talk about and one which took place shortly after the restoration furnishing and occupation of the governor's house was the large property in New Castle County, known as Buena Vista.

[0:05:23]

This is a few miles below the old state road station on the Pennsylvania rail road and along the DuPont highway, the west side of it. This house had been built by a remarkable Delaware State man, John M. Clayton. And it had descended in his family and had been occupied in recent years by Senator C. Douglas Buck.

Senator Buck was the Clayton descendant who would acquire this property earlier in his career. And he and his wife had taken a great interest in maintaining a notable house and grounds. They had developed them, maintain the old trees along the lane and added an addition to the property to the south to accommodate their family and to provide modern living conveniences. They had however, utilized the earlier architecture in planning this addition or South wing as we call it.

Upon Senator Bucks death, he bequest in his will the house, the front field, the access roads to the State of Delaware for a dignified purpose. Governor Terry appointed a commission of Chief Justice Walkeet, Mr. C. Douglas Buck Jr., his sister Mrs. Farquhar *[phonetic]* **[0:07:57]**, Mr. N. Maxine Terry of Dover and myself.

We met several times, inspected the property and rendered a report to the governor recommending that the state accept Buena Vista for the preservation of this historic property. And also utilize it as a meeting place for state agencies. Frequently meetings of the various state agencies were being called for New Castle County but the question frequently arose where would they meet.

Governor Terry accepted this recommendation and instructed the public archives commission to have a care custody management of the property and to handle the restoration of it.

This property was a considerable challenge to me. Not only because of the size of it but also because it was of a very different period of

architecture. Here before I had worked with the colonial period and the 18th Century and early 19th Century.

[0:10:03]

This property was of good inspired style or early Victorian as some people choose to call it. But from my research which was necessary before undertaking anything, the house was an excellent example of empire architecture. I neglected to say that Senator Buck's will also stipulated that Mrs. Buck would continue to occupy the house and the property for the remainder of her life.

We were soon advised that Mrs. Had decided to take a smaller house in Wilmington that Buena Vista was too large for her needs. And she accordingly planned to move to the Wilmington house. It was in this connection that I had several meeting with her. And as the house in Wilmington on Redo Cline would not accommodate many of the furnishings, she very kindly decided to give these to the state to remain in Buena Vista.

We were very pleased to receive this fine gift as some of these furnishings were of the Clayton family period. And they helped us in the deciding what furnishings would be used and how the house would be furnished.

I mentioned earlier the research. The first research was on the house and the ground itself. And then I followed this with intensive study of empire and early Victorian furnishings as I had done very little in that period. To me it was a new and fascinating period but one which had to be learned quickly because time was of the essence. We were expected to get this work done as soon as we could. And make it habitable for the purpose for which it was intended.

The restoration plans within the building itself called for a careful examination of all the timbers supporting the floors, the roofs and other sections of this historic house. They were found to be sufficiently strong so that they would not have to be reinforced to accommodate the thousands of persons who would be visiting this historic property.

Next, we looked into the heating system and found that it had been well maintained and except for some remedial work was adequate. The electrical system however, needed considerable revisions. And these were carefully planned to accommodate the transition from a living property into one which was to be an historic or display property.

[0:15:12]

And also one that would be utilized for the meetings of state agencies. Then the question of air conditioning came in because it is so prevalent in not only homes but most public buildings. And this large house although, easily cooled would also accumulate in the summer time considerable hot air pockets in the upper floors so that these rooms and the meetings rooms had to be air conditioned.

The assignment of rooms was carefully planned. It was necessary to provide living quarters for a custodian so that they would be on the grounds at all times. Not only to show visitors through the house but also to be in attendance when there were meetings or to provide security.

The service wing that the Bucks' had used with the kitchens and laundries and the rooms for servants above were easily converted to a very habitable apartment for the custodian and family.

Also we found that although all luncheons or some diners could not be catered as we originally planned, it was necessary to revise the large kitchen and install facilities for cooking, dish washing and some of the other requirements for the meal services.

Then followed the designation of what the different rooms of the house were to be. Of course the large entrance hall remained the entrance hall. And coming into the house in the hallway, the room to the right running from front to back was an excellently proportioned dining room with a fine curve wooden mantle over the fire place on the north wall.

Across the hallway into the left was a small parlor and back of it or to the west was another small room, a smaller room not a small room, a smaller room. The front room or the small parlor we retained as a sitting room or parlor. And the first thought was that we would make the backroom into a library. Senator and Mrs. Buck had used it as an office for the administration of Buena Vista and other properties.

[0:19:57]

To the south of these two rooms which was the limits of the original house was the large south wing with the hallway on a north-south access. And from it were a number of smaller rooms. Some of which were converted by us to wash rooms to accommodate the public.

These terminated, no, not these but the hallway on which these were located were terminated in a very large room at the extreme south end of the wing. And this large room had been used as the sitting room and parlor by the Buck family.

The north wall of the room was lined with book cases and cabinets bellow. This room of course was to be retained as the meeting room for state agencies. Above were bedrooms, those over the south wing were to be utilized by distinguished visitors. If the governor and his wife decided to stay overnight or for any function, the larger bedroom over the meeting room was reserve for them. This had been Mrs. Bucks' bedroom.

Over the second floor of the old portion of the house, there was a bedroom and a bathroom over the dining room. And over the small parlor, was another bedroom. And another bedroom was over the room that had been the office. We retained all of those as bedrooms but they were to be exhibit bedrooms, furnished an antiques and with dry breeze, bed furnishings, rags or carpets, lighting fixtures everything suitable to the period of the house. They were to be shown to the public who were visiting this historic property.

The one room which was over the office, we converted to a library and called it John M. Claytons' Library, because among the things that Mrs. Buck had turned over to us was the remainder of John M. Claytons' Library. The books that he himself had owned and used, also, there were book cases that he had owned or his nephew who had been his secretary in Washington had owned and some of the nephews' books are also included.

With this new class, it was very easy to plan and furnish a library on the second floor. It is fortunate that we did this because about half way through the furnishing program, I received a telephone call from Mr. Herbert Schiffea, S-C-H-I-F-F-E-A-R, an antique dealer in Pennsylvania who was working at that time as an advisor for the New Castle Historical Society; they had wanted to weed-out their collections. Those items that were not compatible with the furnishings of the Amsteel house *[phonetic]* [0:24:57].

[0:25:00]

Among those furnishings, were John M. Claytons' piano, piano stool, music rack and two fine gastro lamps of the period. We were overjoyed to receive this as a gift from the New Castle Historical Society and the office which had been intended as the library became the music room.

From then on the furnishings were being planned and acquired as quickly as possible. Also, a contract had been awarded for the installation of the air conditioning system. This air conditioning system was not ordinary one because it had to be carefully planned so that the cold air outlets and the returns did not intrude and destroy the atmosphere of this empire house.

In most places we were successful in concealing or making them unobtrusive in the installation of the necessary outlets. The conducts conveying the air were carefully concealed behind walls, in closets and through other means. It was quite difficult in doing this not to make cuts that would weaken supporting floor members or supporting wall members. But this was all accomplished and the system worked very well in distributing cold air and returning hot air from this large property.

In addition to travelling antique shops through Delaware and nearby counties in Maryland and Pennsylvania, I also went to New York to look for suitable furnishings for these numerous rooms. Four poster beds, chairs, desks, numerous sofas, antique rags, we worked with the Wall-Nick Green *[phonetic]* **[0:28:24]** Antique Rag Shop. And they obtained some wonderful carpets for us.

Some of the rooms such as the dining room whereas such large size that we thought perhaps we would have to have two carpets there but fortunately the dealer was able to find one beautiful Kerman rag which fitted perfectly. It had come from an state in Pennsylvania.

Some of the Buck family members contributed furnishings when they saw what was used was to be made of the house. Mr. Frank Buck of New Castle contributed an excellent mirror that reach from the floor to the ceiling and it was placed in the dining room.

Other furnishings from other members of the family followed in the same way. But the majority of the furnishings other than those contributed by Mrs. Buck, her daughter Mrs. Farquhar and her son C.D. Buck Jr. were purchased.

[0:30:00]

The large or extraordinary large rag in the meeting room as we would call it at the extreme south end was left by Mrs. Buck. When large meetings were to be held there, we felt that it should be properly covered. And we purchased six 9 by 12 rags to be placed on top of this extraordinarily fine

rag so that it would not be damaged when large groups were in the room. I site this to give you some idea of the size of that particular rag.

There were many interesting episodes in collecting the antiques and the arrangement of them for this property much had to be studied because as I said earlier I had not have much familiarity with empire furnishings or those of the Victorian period, the whole Victorian period had to be studied and learned so that early Victorians furnishing would be separated from those of the middle and the late period.

Many problems presented themselves in the bed hangings, the bed furnishings, the little pint jars, the type of candle sticks that would go on the dressing tables, fire screens, the fabriques for the drape breeze and curtains of the period, even the hangers for the drape breeze and curtains. All of these details together with a hardware and the many necessary accoutrements to make a successful restoration building.

Finally the job was done. The opening was arranged. The governor, state officials invited her legislature was so large that we had to have two different sit down dinners to accommodate them, one for the Senate and one for the House of Representatives. These were all apparently successful. And then we advertised that the historic house of Buena Vista was opened to the public for examination. And at state agencies would be permitted to hold meeting there.

As it was to be expected, everyone wanted to see Buena Vista so that there were not hundreds but thousands of people the first year. Fortunately we were able to accommodate them.

The custodian was Mrs. George Bottler or as she well-known Mrs. Jessie Bottler, she had been my secretary to hall of records. And when she learned that I was looking for someone to live at Buena Vista and manage it, she asked if she might be considered.

I didn't look further because knowing and trusting Mrs. Bottler, I couldn't think of anyone who could handle the position any better than she could.

[0:34:59]

She had worked with me for years. She knew the necessity of security. She had a very pleasing personality and was able to meet and greet the public very well.

She helped me select a small staff of grounds men, and house keeper and the receptionist. We trained them and instructed them in the do's entry to be explained to the public in their visiting, and in all of their duties with respect to meetings of state agencies. All went quite well, we learned as we progressed, we handled large meetings as it was to be expected. And after paying attention to the restoration, furnishing and administration of Buena Vista itself, my attention was then turn to the grounds. These large acres needed our attention, the planting, the trees, the mowing of the grass and many other details that arise.

Our grounds men was instructed, the equipment was obtained and we went on with our work there. We obtained the services of the Bark a Tree Company *[phonetic]* **[0:37:10]** to identify the many large trees on the property. One of the beach trees is judged to be one of the largest in the east. There are other specimen trees, some of those along the lane needed treatment and others had to be trimmed, wired and cabled. All of this work was being done to bring the grounds up to a state of condition compatible with those of the house.

With Buena Vista work largely completed, I then restricted my visits there to about one afternoon a week. Here before, I've been practically every day. At the same time I was carrying on my duties in Dover and the other installations that came under my oversight.

I'm going to continue still with work on the historic house or historic preservation aspect of the Public Archives Commissions' work. We were in a period of acquiring historic houses, buildings and sites. Specifically we were trying to keep ahead of the bulldozer. There were so many Delaware properties that were being in the post war, the post World War II days, that were being threatened by building developments. New Castle County was being very quickly bought up and developed. People were living the city and the farm lands of New Castle County, especially in the Wilmington area, were disappearing very quickly.

[0:40:11]

One of those that I think off in addition to the Robinson house at Newman's was the old lag house or cabin at Prices Corner. It was a familiar site to thousands of people in New Castle County. Numbered among them were students who were driving back and forth between Newark and the Wilmington area. They were quite familiar with the old place and saw that it had been used as a market for vegetables. And later for the sale of second hand tools and equipment and many of us wondered what would be the final disposition of it.

I at least didn't have to wait too long. One day in February but the year escapes me now, I received a telephone call from Mr. Harvey Fenmar **[phonetic] [0:41:36]** who had been the Sheriff of New Castle County and was very active in political affairs of New Castle County. He told me that he had sold his family property at Prices Corner to one of the major oil companies. And that they wanted to clear the property as soon as possible and erect a service station there. He said that he would give us the log house if we would preserve it.

I asked how much time we had and he said, "Can you come today?" I did drop everything, I got our staff photographer to go with me and we went to see Mr. and Mrs. Fenmar **[phonetic] [0:42:40]**, while I talk to them the photographer made detailed photographs of the old log house from all angles. And while we were doing that, a snow storm came up but he still continued to snap the lens of interior views.

Meanwhile, Mr. and Mrs. Fenmar **[phonetic] [0:43:10]** had agreed that they would give us the log house as a memorial to his mother. And we had to spell out just what the terms and the agreement would be. This was accomplished, we went back to Dover. It was confirmed in writing. And then we had to move very quickly as the oil company wanted immediate possession.

I then got our work crew together and we had in the meantime, the photographs developed. Sketches for work drawings were made. Water proof paper was obtained. And this was cut into tags which were nailed to the logs.

Each of the logs had two tags at each end with the number of that particular log. This was done because we realized that this cabin was to be disassembled, placed in storage and then re-erected in the moving storage and reassembling. We realized too that some of the tags would be lost if we didn't place a number of them on the logs.

[0:45:03]

This was all carefully done. The dismembered log cabin was moved to the grounds of Fort Christina Park where the log cabin had originated in North America. As I said earlier this became the principle of bode of the early settlers, not only of Delaware but of the Delaware River Valley and of those who later cross the appellation mountains went into the middle areas of our country, the plain states and then finally to the west.

Here I intended to re-erect this cabin. My research showed that it had been on land owned by the Ulrich family, one of the early Swedish settling families. So it was quite appropriate to re-erect a Swedish type log cabin of a Swedish family where Fort Christina and Christina Ham had stood were the log cabin had first been introduced into America.

First of all these logs were carefully stacked, covered and protected along the south wall in Fort Christina Park until we could find the time and the funds to re-erect this log cabin. We're removing fast with the various properties that were coming to our attention.

I believe the next one was the -- oh, you can...

Interviewer: I just got my glass.

Leon DeValinger: I thought you were becoming enough. I believe the next house we acquired was the stone tavern in the village or town of Little Creek in Kent County Delaware. This large two storey stone house has always been a mystery to many people interested in historic preservation and historic properties. They wondered why in the county were there was no native stone, there was a stone two storey house, strong masonry construction.

The local tradition was that it had been ballasted from ships coming into the landing at Little Creek. And this is probably one of the most plausible answers to the question of where the stone came from. It could of course come from New Castle County but who was wealthy enough to bring the stone down from the quarries along the Brandywine.

Well, what did happened was the Delmar a power and light company was erecting new power lines in the Little Creek area and they needed to cross this property, then owned by a man named Winslow. Mr. Winslow had died in the meantime before he had made us a settlement with the power company for the sale of some of his land for right of way of their transmission poles. And his heirs were anxious to get a settlement.

Their attorney was Joshua Tolley Esquire *[phonetic]* **[0:49:50]** of Dover. And he were represented these heirs and insisted that the property not be divided so that the Delmar Power and Light company *[phonetic]* **[0:50:06]** bought the whole property in order to gain the right of way necessary for their transmission lines.

[0:50:18]

They in turn had no interest in this old house and Mr. Tolley *[phonetic]* **[0:50:31]** negotiated with myself and the president of our commission a prominent attorney in Wilmington, David A. Anderson of the firm of Potter-Anderson and Carron. Mr. Anderson, Mr. Tolley, Mr. Spear of DPNL *[phonetic]* **[0:50:58]** and other DPNL officials met me there on winter day and we examined the property, they transfer the deed to us and we acquired the one historic property in Little Creek. It's not only interesting as an early type of building, a tavern but it's also interesting architecturally and worthy of preservation so that this property was acquired in the grand plan of making available, enough historic properties or architecturally important properties to interest visitors to come to Delaware and not drive quickly through but stay for two or three days and see what we had to show in the way of history and architecture.

This was just another link in this plan which would extend from New Castle County for those coming from the north down through Kent and Sussex and for those coming from the south we had a number of historic properties in Sussex, Kent and then into New Castle County. In all we were to acquire about 33 properties in this manner.

The stone tavern as I've just related was acquired and again, we had to put it in a holding pattern, we could not go forward of other restoration work. At first, we thought the people in the community would have enough local pride so that it wouldn't be damaged. But apparently vandalism was not lipid to any one part of our state. We soon found that windows were being broken out. After boarding these up which we were reluctant to do because of the appearance, we found that they broke into the back door and some of these teenagers which we were able to apprehend had broken blast trades out of the very attractive stairway, smeared paint, damaged plaster and done a fair amount of damage in the house.

Some of these we repaired immediately and then tightened our security. And as it is on the main street of the town, we ask the authorities and the police to look after the property more closely.

Meantime, another interesting property in Kent County came to our attention and it was a long route nine.

[0:55:02]

Route nine becomes the main street of Little Creek and it is also the road that leads to the Dickenson Mansion when you travel the Bay road area. North of Little Creek, there is an intersection of roads known as Cowgill's,

C-O-W-G-I-L-L-'S Corner and just south of Cowgill's Corner was an octagonal school house.

This school house was a rarity. There were only three known to have been built in Delaware, the one near Cowgill's Corner, one there middle town and another near Perish Tavern in New Castle County. The octagonal school house was not peculiar to Delaware. It was a structure which was supposed to revolutionize education in its day.

The idea was that there would -- with the eight sides of the octagonal building, the teacher, "The teacher," there was only one teacher, would have a grade one through eight along each of the walls. And he or she would teach from their desk and station in the center of the floor. This location a frequently shared with the large pot-bellied-stew *[phonetic]* **[0:57:12]** which was the sole means of heat in this early school houses.

Also these were afictionally known as Beehive Schools. They used to say that people driving in their carriages or wagons passed the schools in the spring time would hear the buzz of the children reciting and with sound like bees around the hive.

This particular type of school was supposed to be efficient as the teacher could put one class writing on their slates, another could be studying their spelling books or another could be reciting and another or and other could be studying from their books.

This early school building had been acquired by the State Board of Education when they took over all of the local school districts and combined them into the State Board of Education. They ceased to use the old school building at Cowgill's Corner. And sold it to a group of interested individuals many of whom had attended the school and wanted to see it preserved. And they formed themselves into the Cowgill's Corner Community Club. They held various types of meetings there.

But in the later years, the club decline in numbers, people moved away died off or lost interest and the remaining officers were Mr. and Mrs. John Tarburton. And Mrs. Ozella Cullen, C-U-L-L-E-N, who was a secretary of the organization.

Mr. Tarburton had previously come to me and asked what might be done about saving the old school.

[1:00:01]

We had even discussed taking it down carefully and re-erecting it on the grounds of the Delaware State Museum. But he and his wife and Mrs. Cullen didn't particularly like that idea. And some of their earlier classmates opposed that idea. It just as well that they did because as I have been narrating, this old school house was now to become available. Mr. Tarburton came in with a firm offer that they would give a deed of title to the state for a dignified purpose to preserve the old school.

I took this proposal to our Public Archives Commission and they did not hesitate in accepting it. While doing many other things, I traced the title of the school, it's an early history and with staff members, we served a, I shouldn't say served, I should have said, inspected the property. Then I employed a surveyor to lay out the plot of land following the old boundaries of the deed from the State Board of Education to the Cowgill's Corner Community Club and we reestablished our survey lines before undertaking any work on the property.

The whole plan was to get the school back to the condition that it had been originally. We asked former students for their recollections. We inquired about photographs, any letters or other accounts that would shed light on persons who had knowledge of this early school. We were successful in interviewing some teachers...

[1:02:38]

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