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Class: Oral History and Community Memory (AMCV 1903G)

Narrator: Kim Hewson

Interviewer: Nate Weisenberg

Nate Weisenberg: All right, this is Nate Weisenberg, and I'm doing an interview with Kim Hewson for the Mashapaug Pond oral history project. It's Saturday, October 29, 2011, about 4:30 p.m., and we're having this interview in my house, which—Kim has been so gracious to come here. And we're located on the East Side of Providence! So, I guess without any further ado, what—how did you first get involved with the [Renaissance] Church, I guess would be my first question.

Kim Hewson: Basically, I was looking for a new church when my pastor chose to relocate back to Florida, and so I discovered—I had taken a brief kind of, I guess you would say, a mini-course, or there were some gatherings at this church called Renaissance, which didn't seem like a church to me at all. It was in a storefront. [Laughter] It was like a café. And so that's how I got to know people there, and then ultimately, when my pastor moved on, that's when I seriously started considering attending Renaissance Church.

Weisenberg: So you've been in the area for about how long?

Hewson: Seven and a half years.

Weisenberg: So what really stood out to you about the church?

Hewson: Well, I think—I think what stood out to me was that there was a particular connection between culture and spirituality, and that there were people who were concerned about things that I had been concerned about in my life before I converted to Christianity. And it was kind of affirming for me to be around people who were interested in [pause] anti-poverty issues, art, and other social justice causes.

Weisenberg: So the church has a real social justice focus?

Hewson: Yes, I would say it does. It does.

Weisenberg: And so correct me if I'm wrong, but the church started out on the East Side of Providence, is that right?

Hewson: Well....

Weisenberg: And then it moved?

Hewson: I don't know the exact genesis, but it's been in an embarrassingly high number of places, I guess. [Laughter] If one would consider stability to be one building. But I don't believe

the church is a building. I think the church lives in the people. So, anyway, it's not embarrassing. In any case, it's been in hotels, it's been in an elementary school, it's been in the Armory here on the East Side of Providence, over by RISD. It's been in a house, it's been in a dance studio, the Columbus Theatre, and now ultimately we're in a renovated Hollywood Video space next to the—adjacent to—the Mashapaug Pond.

Weisenberg: What prompted the decision to move down there?

Hewson: Well, we had been located on the East Side for some time at the Armory and then we relocated to the—an elementary school when the fire codes were not improved as promised at the—this Armory that was built in the 1800s. And we had always wanted to kind of—the church's mission of spiritual growth among the church members, as well as reaching out to others in the world, kind of—it made more sense to be—the location of South Providence kind of made more sense to do because there are so many opportunities for outreach there, in terms of missional activities and also the pastor—it's pretty much the pastor—we'd been looking for a site, but the pastor came upon this and just really felt led that this is where we were supposed to be.

Weisenberg: Could you tell me a little bit more about the pastor?

Hewson: Yes, Scott Axtmann is a pastor. He's an interesting young man. He's in his mid-forties. Pastor Scott's a musician, he's very interested in the arts, he's a husband of a wife, they have two children. He's got—I've been—I've traveled around the world with him to Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Excuse me, that's not true. He went to Haiti after I did. We went to Nicaragua together. About him, he's a person who loves people and he wants to see people develop in the way that they were designed to be. And he brings messages of—brings a message of good news in a way that really can inspire and really can give hope where there might not be some or even if there are troubles, then, that—he can give an encouraging word.

[5:08]

But like I said, he's artistic, he's an artist. He's a writer, he's a musician, and he's also—he does painting, too. And like I said, he's got a heart for this world. And I really—I'm thankful that I've found a pastor such as him who's interested in reaching the hearts of people in Providence and beyond.

Weisenberg: So you're a deacon of the church now. How did that come about?

Hewson: Well, I guess deacon is not really the term. I'm actually—the title is the local outreach coordinator. And that came about probably because I've been doing things, serving for the church in various outreaches and activities that we've done. We've thrown—we've done concerts, we've done open mic nights on the West Side, we've done a variety of things. And I believe through Scott's and my friendship he recognized that there were some qualities that I have that are ones he thought would be useful for some of the goals of our church and communicating with local people and creating partnerships with them so that we could collaborate to help the community.

Weisenberg: So [pause] you've been involved with the church now—and so you were a member of the church before it moved, and then you were serving as sort of, the community liaison when you moved down to the South Side, just to make sure I'm clear on the chronology?

Hewson: Yes, yes. That didn't happen immediately. That was after a few months, I think, after we moved down to the South Side.

Weisenberg: What were your first impressions of the Mashapaug site?

Hewson: Well, I visited there before, when there was a Stop & Shop. But you don't really—and the Hollywood Video. So that was the first time I—but you don't really see it. First time I went was with a group. I believe you're familiar with Holly [Ewald]. And they had a group that did a procession, and I was very interested in this procession, so I joined them with some—my friends' niece and nephews, and we went for the walk, and boy, I just thought it was such a beautiful space—beautiful place—a lovely, huge lake in the middle of this urban environment, like an oasis, as you were. And then to learn more about it really surprised me, all of the trauma that's happened there. So—it was definitely with mixed emotions that I learned about the site. That was when we were considering moving into the space, during that period. But probably 2009 is when I went—first went on the walk, when we were interested in renting the place and we were negotiating with the—Kimco, who I think is the management company that Stop & Shop and—who has the lease. They're—I think they're the owners of the building, or at least they have like a thirty-year lease, or something.

Weisenberg: So you heard about Holly and Urban Pond Procession.

Hewson: Uh-huh.

Weisenberg: And thought, “let's see what this is about.”

Hewson: Well, I was very interested just because I'm like, well, this is a location we're interested in, and I'd seen signs around there talking about hazardous materials. And I was just curious about what that was, and so went down there and the Big Nazo puppets were there [laughter], on this walk. People playing music, singing songs, and a very festive atmosphere. So, yeah, I definitely wanted to find out what was up. It's very sad—I live next to the Blackstone River, and I do—I try to do—things when the flow comes off my lawn, I try to use organic fertilizer, I don't fertilize my lawn with things that are damaging. I want to do things that will help heal this beautiful natural environment that we have.

Weisenberg: So you have some sort of sense of what—how water's important and sort of part of our lives, and how it's—just speaking personally, just one impression I had is that I was struck by how removed everything in the area seemed from Mashapaug, just sort of fenced-in, obviously because of the pollution, there are certain areas that you can and can't go to. I was just wondering if you could maybe talk a little about that, or if you had a different impression. I've only been there once, full disclosure.

[9:58]

Hewson: Well, there are residences that were built right adjacent to the water, so you have waterfront homes with beautiful—I won't call them estates, but they're beautiful homes, that neighborhood is *excellent*, and you can get houses over there, I don't know if there are any on the market now, but I know a guy who picked one up at a steal. And it's just a nice, nice neighborhood, I think, to live in. [Pause] However, I think you might be referring to where the current school is and where the Stop & Shop plaza is.

Weisenberg: That's it.

Hewson: As you continue around, I've not—I know there are homes if—as you continue north, there are homes adjacent to it. But, yes, I didn't really give that any mind, really. I knew there was a factory there, so it didn't really cross my mind, but knowing the other elements—and I've also kayaked it, I've gone out there with my kayak, despite warnings about the high levels of algae, dangerous algae blooms. I've gone out and paddled around it. But—so I've seen the pond, and it's—it's big.

Weisenberg: Why did you go out?

Hewson: Well [laughter]. It was because it was late and I did, I was kind of late. I wanted to get more paddling time with a friend of mine and also because the—it was an advisory, it wasn't a mandate. There was a public sign listed there, that the algae blooms were at a dangerous level, and it's recommended that you don't—do not go in. And as in a kayak you don't immerse yourself, I don't touch the water and I hose down my boats and oars and other things afterwards, so I didn't have a huge amount of concern about that.

Weisenberg: Did you get the sense that the pond is used pretty frequently by the community?

Hewson: It is not. As far as I can see. I have seen people paddling around in it, but it's very rare. And—however, I'm not down there that much. I do like to go down by—there's a boat dock, there's an area with a dock there, and I do like to go down there because it's a lovely, treed, grassy area with a—it's very quiet. It's near the church, too, so if I sometimes have a little extra time going to a meeting, or whatever, yes, I'll go there and relax.

Weisenberg: I found that when we went down there—I found that interesting. There's sort of this juxtaposition between—there are different parts of the pond where it's much noisier, there's the industrial park. On the other side there's really sort of, like you were saying earlier, there's almost an oasis. Do you get that sense, that there's many different sides to it, almost?

Hewson: Hmmm—well I think you're referring to the industrial park where Route 10 circumvents [Interstate] 95 and goes around the Triangle neighborhood and around South Providence, but [pause] yes, the—I think there are—oh yeah, I mean, there's the residential area, where—I don't know when if those were developed. They look like they were developed prior to Route 10 having been put in, but I wouldn't know exactly. But in any case, yes, there are different aspects, there are different developmental communities there.

Weisenberg: To turn a little bit more to what the church does, how would you describe the community that you serve?

Hewson: Well, I think that [long pause] we serve a diverse community of people [pause] who are young, mostly—we were primarily—our audience was a college audience, so it was kind of a risk to come off of College Hill and go down to the South Side—South End—because many people chose—we were concerned that people wouldn't make the trip, because it's about a two-mile trip I think from College Hill, I'm not exactly sure about that. But there's a city bus line that comes down and sure enough, a lot of people did continue to come. They—but that's one aspect. Recently, the church has grown with our location. We've had a smattering of older people, more mature people such as myself. And my sons. However, they don't attend anymore, they don't live in the area. They've moved on and done different things. But I would say that it's a diverse group, multiethnic. However, I will say that it's generally [pause]—the class of people, I would say, is middle-upper class.

Weisenberg: So do you—so have you felt a little bit, sort of, apart from the community? Have you felt part of the community down there? There—have you been trying to incorporate community members to a greater [inaudible]? Do you feel like you're already doing a good job with that?

[14:59]

Hewson: Well, it's a good question. That area of South Providence has a high degree of Dominican Republic—Dominican-Americans, I guess you would say. Our current Mayor of Providence is Dominican. And I think it's—I've heard figures up to 50% of the people are Dominicans. So you get a lot of people whose home language is Spanish and I have some Dominican friends who come to church, including the ones that I went to the Mashapaug procession with, and [pause] we've invited people. Several people of the neighborhood have come and I think we have—I don't know exactly how many have continued to come. I know there were a couple of moms in the neighborhood who came with their kids for a while, but then they got a job on Sunday. But we've done different outreaches to kind of integrate ourselves into the neighborhood. But I think that as I mentioned before, some of the outreaches we've done we have included—we have been integrating ourselves into the community. However, most people commute. There's only a smattering of people who live in the area.

Weisenberg: Uh-huh.

Hewson: So that—we're trying, we don't want to come into the neighborhood and say, "Hey, this is how you live your life." But we're coming in and seeing what the needs are, we've made friends there. And some of those friends are continuing at the church.

Weisenberg: So I—one thing I was noticing from—I was looking at the church's website, and I was noticing that you do a lot of work with Burmese refugees in Providence?

Hewson: Oh yes, thanks for reminding me about that. Because—yes, a lot of Burmese have been invited to the United States by the federal government through a refugee status because of their political status in what is called Myanmar. However, the Burmese tend to stay with that term because—I don't know if UN has given Myanmar status or what—how it is, but several different ethnic groups have been given this refugee status and they've moved, they've had to flee their original homelands and into different parts of the world, but they've been invited here by the United States. And international—the International Institute which is located on Reservoir Avenue in the neighborhood has been doing work with them. And we collaborated with International Institute as well as through another church in East Greenwich and we've gotten to know them and we've gotten—we've collaborated with them and reached out to them and created opportunities for them to feel more community and to do different things, like show them around the neighborhood. To—we take new people who fly in and we try to make them not feel like strangers in a new place. And we've also opened up the church, doing various activities with them. Even opening up the church for them to have their own services. But now we're just doing different events with them. But several of them attend the church and listen to the English as their English is improving [laughter] and their children's English is really improving, they bring their kids. And we're going to have a Thanksgiving meal with them soon, a little cultural event. Talk to them about the history and tradition behind Thanksgiving, and so on and so forth, yes, we've tried to do different things to make them feel at home here.

Weisenberg: That's great. Picking up on what you were mentioning, so—obviously there will be services on Sunday, but the church sounds like it is also open for a number of other events that involve the community?

Hewson: Uh-huh. Occasionally, the doors are open for various events. We've had [pause] different groups come in, show movies, have concerts. We collaborate with a group that does afterschool arts program at the Reservoir Avenue elementary school. And they've had several events in our space. Run for Freedom, which is a group, is—an anti-human trafficking group that provides refuge for people caught in the webs of that situation. Of course, we—Holly Ewald, I think that's how you pronounce her last name—she has been doing things with the Procession.

[19:59]

But we've also opened the space up for the community in terms of the status of the land where we are. And we want the community members—we've allowed the community members to come in with the, I think it's called the Rhode Island Environmental Justice League. They have hosted gatherings in our space so that the community members can be informed about the status of the—I forget the term used for the cleaning of the—well, just to know the status of the chemicals that are leaching from the site and how that's affecting the water. And how it might have—there are some brown zones, they call them, I forget the actual term [inaudible]. Yes. Those are several of the outreaches we've done. We've also thrown some big festivals around—there've been some sad things happen in the neighborhood, so we've tried to [pause] do some things to create some harmony and also some hope, by bringing food and backpacks and the good news of our Lord Jesus. And as well as—as well as telling people, [pause] helping people who are hurting. And like I said, there've been some murders in the area, there've been some drownings in the local pool. Several churches and we collaborated to throw a few events over

there. Not commemorating that, of course, but to, just to bring some hope to the neighborhood for people who might be looking for it.

Weisenberg: Oh. So you could say that Renaissance, in working with the other churches in the area, has been a real source of support.

Hewson: We're growing to be. We're—we certainly don't have a monopoly on that, that's why we've collaborated with different groups in the area to have our members use their time and energy to—we're not trying to reinvent the wheel, Nate. We're trying to collaborate with them to—in order to have some effect on, in people's lives.

Weisenberg: And this is a question that's coming to mind now. Why is the church called Renaissance?

Hewson: If you're familiar with the history of Providence, I believe the term was coined by Buddy Cianci, the former Mayor. And he called it the "Renaissance City" because so much was happening in Providence in terms of construction; I think, urban renewal. I've heard stories and seen pictures of the city back in the '70s and '80s, and things have changed quite a bit, so I think the French term from the arts period—rebirth—applies. But you'd have to ask Pastor Scott specifically, but I think it is—there's definitely the metaphor of rebirth that's part of the ethos of our church.

Weisenberg: You were mentioning the community meetings that you were holding with the Environmental Justice League about the contamination of the area. Can you tell me a little bit more about those?

Hewson: Well, the meetings were to bring people in who are the current managers of the site. I forget their name right offhand. They are the people who bought the site, and there are—they brought in representatives who are in charge of the mitigation, I believe that's the verb, which is how are the things that are leaching in the ground, they're giving reports and updates. And then community members are encouraged to ask questions and the Environmental Justice League is creating an opportunity for people to have voice and to maybe make suggestions for how the community will look in the future. As well as like I said, updating them. So I've—we've helped out, splattering the community with just inviting people to those events, going around hanging posters, taking suggestions from people and again, creating a space where people can dialogue about these things. So some of the meetings have been pretty heated, too, because there's frustrations from some of the community members. But it's good to talk it out. And local politicians have also come because they've got to do their end in terms of enforcing, ensuring that things are enforced in the area of the concern for the environment.

Weisenberg: Seems like the church is really a space where people can come. It's sort of a safe space where people can come and sort of air their thoughts.

[24:59]

Hewson: Oh, absolutely. I mean, when we were asked to do it, it was like, oh yeah, sure, that's what we're all about, as a place where we can dialogue and hopefully resolve conflicts and share the good news. And what I mean by that is the good news is that a lot of statistics are showing that the levels of the various chemicals and leads and heavy materials have decreased in the actual site where Stop & Shop and the old Hollywood where we are located—has gone down. I can't speak to the school right now. We'll see about the water levels. If things are changing there there's still the algae bloom, so I think that's going to—that might take longer. I'm no scientist, so I don't really know, but I'm hoping. The Blackstone River has shown great improvement, and I know that there were many heavy metals and paints and things that were spilled into that river over the—throughout history.

Weisenberg: How would you describe the church's relationship with the school? I guess, because it sounds like there was quite a bit of frustration in the community over the fact that it got built on that site.

Hewson: Yes, I wasn't really familiar with that controversy in terms of the site. Frankly, we've tried to collaborate with them in terms of providing tutors for them and their afterschool program. We have, like I mentioned before, a lot of Brown and RISD students, and a lot of them would like to help out. However, it appears that they have—I'm not quite sure—but it appears that they have an adequate amount of help in that area, so we haven't really been able to get a foot in the door, so to speak. But so far, it's just a few conversations with people. We're rarely—our doors are rarely open when the students come in and out of the school, so it's kind of like two ships passing in the night, unfortunately. And we're considering different ways we might be able to affect—or we might be able to, yes, I guess, have effect on students. We don't have a huge youth group at our church, but we have a lot of—we have some young musicians, so we're looking at maybe having some way of reaching out in that respect. But there's some ideas on the burners right now.

Weisenberg: So how would you describe how the community feels—or as best as you understand it—how the community feels about the area, about if there's any sort of sense of the legacy of the Gorham site. If there's—so I'm thinking in particular, there's those markers that says in English and Spanish, “this part, this land is safe,” “this land is contaminated.” If the community has, I guess, any sense of—if they just feel like they've been left with sort of a toxic legacy? I'm not sure if I would really put it that way, but all right. [Laughter]

Hewson: I guess that's a good question, since I'm relatively new to that area and I only go down there a couple of times a week. And frankly, we're on the other side of Reservoir Avenue when we're doing—where we've made a large, a fairly significant amount of friends. In that near triangle neighborhood where the—we did a large amount of canvassing to get people to come to the—well, come to various Renaissance events, but as well as the meetings that Environmental Justice League sponsored, I didn't really get into deep conversations with people in terms of their notions of it. However, they're aware that there is a toxic legacy, as you mention. And they want to ensure that Gorham remains true to it. And they—what I've heard different people express is they would like to see kind of restoration to how the area might have been, and ideally, a park-like environment around the edges of the area. Those are some of the conversations I've had. But in terms of when it was a factory, are there any golden memories that people have shared? No, I

haven't heard any of those stories. Because, hey, maybe people did—do look back on it. Those were good times, working back in the factory. Maybe they got some beautiful jewelry. I don't know. No, currently it's pretty much a sense of, "No, we've got to ensure that our city will defend the—this legacy which has been passed on to Gorham, and Gorham needs to be responsible in terms of mitigating it and helping—and ensuring that any future use will include things that are good and viable and life-giving to the community."

[30:10]

Weisenberg: If you can talk a little bit more about when you were walking around, what the reception was from the community, in terms of the environmental meetings or just the perceptions of Renaissance more generally?

Hewson: Well, I didn't go as a representative of Renaissance when I was inviting people to the Environmental Justice League. I was just a concerned citizen who was inviting people to be a part of a dialogue, basically. So that was not very—that's a separate issue. But in terms of inviting people to our Easter activities, our Christmas services, and different things like that, people were like, "Oh, great. Yes." Very warm to the idea, and some people actually followed through and did come. There are some Cambodian folks who came and had a great time, won a bunch of—their kids won a bunch of toys and games and things at one of the outreaches that we had. There's—but we haven't seen from that near neighborhood—I haven't seen—a lot of consistency in terms of attendance. But in terms of their perceptions? "Oh, there's a church there? I didn't even know it." People don't really walk over there. I don't know, some people come around, they exercise there and stuff in the park. They walk dogs and whatnot. But there was not really a lot of awareness that we were even there. But no, there was no negative—well, there may have been a negative person or two. [Laughter] "No thanks, I don't want to go to church" type of thing.

Weisenberg: Hmmm.

Hewson: In this culture that happens frequently. But—I mean this culture, of America. However, all in all, it was a generally warm, if not enthusiastic reception.

Weisenberg: How—I'm trying to find a way to put this up [laughter], to express this next question. So how would you see the future of—the church's future in the area? What it might look like, five, ten years down the line?

Hewson: Well, that's a good question. We're [laughter] having some space issues since so many people are coming in there. There's a 300-person limit so there's talk of expanding into another partition of the building. We only have a five-year lease, so we're coming up on two years of that, so there's—who knows, if the church will continue there, or we'll have a spur go elsewhere. But in terms of the community, I think what's happening is there've been different strands of people, different groups of people, who have made connections with people in the area, like I said, in the Reservoir Avenue school, on Mitchell Street, where we've done some beautification of the street itself and some of the—doing some gardening, some of the four-way stop medians, I think you call them. They're the four-way stops: we've done some gardening in those. But I

think that we're just going to continue to—we know that there's a lot of people out there who have a lot of needs. And I think we're going to—and when I think of five years from now, I would just like to think that the people we've met now, they might come to be a part of this movement when we want to reach people who have needs. And they will want, they'll be enthused to do the same thing. South Providence is—there's so many beautiful homes, there's beautiful parks, and some beautiful people. So I would love to see that, that whether or not Renaissance stays there, that there will be a church plant or at least these missional groups. I use that term in terms of these projects, these outreaches, would continue to thrive in the neighborhoods around there.

Weisenberg: So you can see the church having a regardless—even if the church ends up moving from its current location, you can still envision having a presence there.

[34:54]

Hewson: Yes, yes. And I'd love to think that—this is just my hopefulness, I don't really know what the outlook is, but being able to paddle in kayaks or use boats on that pond. I don't—fishing looks like it's out of the question for a long time, but with the Burmese, some of the people from Burma, the Cambodians that live around there, a lot of these people are fishermen. And they love water. And so, I guess, in my mind, boy, wouldn't it be beautiful if one day that—the toxic algae blooms that are there would be completely mitigated. And I don't know how fast that can be expedited, but I know there are people that are concerned about it, some in the community—our church community—and more without. Well, I can't say that, but bottom line is, wouldn't it be great if we could enjoy the natural blessings there.

Weisenberg: Exactly. I'm thinking of what you were saying towards the beginning. Just it's such a pristine site, and it seems like it's a real shame that it's just—it doesn't seem like—it isn't being used. You were mentioning the communities that love to fish. And so you can really see that as part of the long-term.

Hewson: Yes. In terms of providing sustenance, but also recreation and pleasure. There's a lot of potential there. But unfortunately at this point in history, it doesn't seem like it's going to happen. And I'd love to see that be able to happen.

Weisenberg: I guess one question that I'm thinking of is—you also teach history in Pawtucket, is that right?

Hewson: Uh-huh.

Weisenberg: So has—how does your experience with your church influence your teaching at all? Does—sort of the way you look at things? Any experiences in South Providence that have shaped the way you teach your students?

Hewson: Well, one thing that I [pause]—one thing that I like to think that I've grown in as a teacher is to recognize that it's not really that important what I'm teaching, it's who I'm teaching. And when I can look, when I can frame the content within the context of the student's

experiences. That said, I'm there to help broaden their experiences, but if I'm not making a personal connection with the students, then I often fail in affecting their hearts. And I think that when you can affect a student's heart, you will really capture their minds. Well, and it works both ways, I mean, because the heart and mind often—well, [laughter] sometimes they're in conflict—but they work up, they play upon one another. And so what I'm trying to say is that the experience—and I think that's the heart—if I can take a student's experience and I think of the Slater Mill and the origins of all of the Industrial Revolution in the Blackstone Valley, where Pawtucket is the infamous, or famous—it's a wonderful thing to make products at a price that is affordable, it really is. Unfortunately, there have been a lot of environmental consequences to it. So this is a rich ground for teaching that, where I am. And in terms of the *cost*, though, when you subjugate a river and you do certain things to the river and there are effects and consequences. And in terms of—so that's not really something that is taught in our church—but creation care is something that the Creator wants. I mean, He invented this, this beauty, and He would like to see that—I think he's pleased to see that to be cared for. That was a mandate. But, and it has great healing power. Great, I think the earth has great potential for healing. That's why I'm hopeful about the signs and the reports from the Gorham, the people who are coming and do the readings for Gorham, so that we, as the Mashapaug site has shown, they've diminished or at least they've gone down, which is good news. But, getting back to your question specifically. Yes, I talk to the kids about why do people move to place. Geography plays a big part. So I talk about the factories in the Blackstone Valley. I haven't really discussed this site in particular, but we do talk about environmental consequences, social consequences, economic consequences.

[40:01]

And human life consequences, in terms of particularly Slater Mill and the cotton that they used to turn into textile cloth which was brought directly from the cotton fields in the South, which ironically, the guy who funded it, Moses Brown, was—had a schism with his brother. And they argued forever here in Providence, Moses and John Brown. Moses was a Quaker—converted to Quakerism, I guess you'd say, and he was against slavery, yet he funded this mill up in Pawtucket by the falls there, which was fast-moving and could take care of the design that Samuel Slater brought over from England. And he was criticized on various ways. But his brother was still—maintained the family business of slave trading, among other things, but Moses was still a part of it in spite of the fact that he was against slavery. So these are the things that I talk about: migration, immigration, what do people do when they come here to the United States. As a U.S. history teacher, I'm still learning. I mean, I've only been teaching it for now, for six years. And every year I learn something. So I think it's interesting to think about [pause] the purposes for—I don't know, it was a good question and you've got me thinking but in terms of—I try to look at the student and the experiences of the place where we are. And where I am includes that and [pause] I think I am a learner as well, and I think my passion for learning, which includes a learning in the church about different aspects of God's people through time, that doesn't come out in the classroom because we're not supposed to focus on things specifically in terms of [pause] my beliefs. However, I think the traditions in the United States have included—it's undeniable that the Puritans and the Pilgrims and various Jewish communities have, as well as spiritual—other spiritual groups like Native Americans here, have had a significant impact on the growth and development in the region, so we do talk about that. Yes. I don't preach to my students, by any means, but I do—we do—have dialogue about the

individuals who have shaped the economic, social, and political background or forefront of the region.

Weisenberg: So you think that they—it does—sounds like they respond well to that?

Hewson: Well, I think if they can get a head—their heads—around this—many of the students who are at the school where I am are either recent immigrants or first or second generation. A lot of the, a lot of Pawtucket's history has included a huge immigrant base. It was prior, it was Eastern Europe, but there's been a lot of movement, and now you have Cape Verdeans, Dominicans, Colombians, Puerto Ricans, and Asians, and there's been a—the school used to be actually a strong Jewish neighborhood, and we still have some families of—with that background, but there's been a lot of movement, a lot of people moved out of the area.

Weisenberg: This is reminding me—as someone who's raised Jewish myself, I should preface, I should mention that before I ask this question—so this fascinates me, both in Pawtucket and in the area where the church is around Mashapaug,

Hewson: [inaudible]

Weisenberg: There's this real sense of diversity.

Hewson: Yes, there has been [laughter]—I think there's many urban environments, Nate. In—we're not unique that there has been just a great influx of people from all over. And I think that's included because sometimes there's been, well there's a host of reasons.

[44:56]

I think migration and immigration is a huge topic. But—yes—I think but there's been—I will use the term—a lot of white flight in a lot of these places. And people who choose to move in oftentimes are people who can afford it, but they're hard workers who are go-getters and you can look around the neighborhood, there's little mom & pop storefronts all over the place, there's small churches in storefronts as well, you'll see some wonderful restaurants in the area. And that includes both Pawtucket, where I'm mentioning, as well as South Providence, but even more so in South Providence, because there's such more high-density housing in that area. Well, Pawtucket has it as well, but there's just more geography there in the South End.

Weisenberg: And so do you think that this place in South Providence—do you think it has—if, maybe this is taking a leap too far, but do you think it has sort of a place in history? And if so, how would you describe it?

Hewson: Wow, I mean, I think you would have to talk to an architect. I've heard stories of the people who built the homes up here on the East Side. I can't get it straight, which way it is. The people who were up on the East Side built everything up here, a lot of European-Americans, Europeans came over here, built beautiful mansions and homes over here, and then went over to that side of town and used their skills and built those neighborhoods. It might go the other way, but I tend to think they built these mansions over here and the beautiful homes over here first,

and then they went over there. So the architect might be able to give a little more teeth to that. But, yes, there's a rich history. What specifically was your question now?

Weisenberg: Oh, no problem. I guess—if it has a place—if you can think of the neighborhood as having a place in history, just in the sense that every place has some sort of story. And whether that in this neighborhood where it's more tied to Gorham, or whether it's more tied to the community today—

Hewson: Yes. Yes.

Weisenberg: Do you think that there's some kind of main story that comes out, or is it maybe [inaudible] different stories?

Hewson: You know, I can't really speak to that. There's a variety of stories [laughter]. I think all of urban areas in the so-called Northeast Corridor, I mean, there's a lot of places where factories have closed down and yet people want to live in the areas. So I think that that's one of the narratives that you'll find, is: there—people need places to live. And a lot of people have moved into these areas. But there still are some vibrant businesses that are still there, but you see a lot of that: factories have closed down and are boarded up. And unfortunately, South Providence also has a huge amount of foreclosures as well. But, yes, in terms of history, I'm just amazed at some of the streets there, when, if you drive around there. Just the beauty and the artistry of the homes and they're just gorgeous. And so yes, “we've had this house for a hundred years,” where another guy's like, “No, we just bought it a few years ago.” I don't know if there's a lot of gentrification, people moving back into the area. But I think—I don't know—I want to get to know some of the folks more around there, and you're encouraging me by that question.

Weisenberg: So, I guess, one thing that we touched on a little bit earlier I think is that—and which I'm sort of thinking up again now—because I think it—we've been talking a little bit more about the community and some of the history—is that the sense that Renaissance does—has a focus that's not only just on community, but it's more external too, and talking about trips elsewhere around the world. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Hewson: Well, as I mentioned before, when we were up on College Hill, we were talking about the good news that God wants people to recognize, and it is good news, but it's not really good news if you just keep it to yourself. And that's part of Jesus' desire, was to go out and share that with people. And that can happen in a variety of ways. It can look different in different ways. Having—it seems like when you—there are residents that live up here, obviously in College Hill, it's diverse, with Fox Point, and there are some rough spots too. There are some important institutions up here, of people that live here.

[49:59]

But I think that with the heart of [pause] Renaissance has a social justice focus, and this was a better match for us, I think, to take the heart of mission and the heart of the good news and kind of bring them together. And we're still figuring out how that looks, but this seems like it's the right place to be for right now, and various things like collaboration with a group who does

things—who mentors children of incarcerated, whose parents are incarcerated or at least one or both are incarcerated, we've got a variety of people who are doing that. We've got people working with the International Institute [pause] in terms of the refugees, also volunteering their teaching English. We're also doing the work with the beautification of the neighborhood around Mitchell Street and ongoing relationships with folks there, teaching them ballet, kung fu, playing baseball, and doing, helping with tutoring and homework. But there are needs here and social justice is a term that's really popular and hip right now, but it's not fair when certain people don't—it's not really fair when certain people get overlooked and when God's people can do something about it, they should do something about it. And we have an opportunity and we're taking advantage of it and collaborating with others like that church I mentioned in East Greenwich doing the arts outreach in the afternoon with the Reservoir Avenue school.

Weisenberg: I guess, would you have any final thoughts about the church, about the pond? We already talked a little about what your hopes for the future are in terms of the church, but how you see the relationship evolving, or anything else you'd like to add?

Hewson: [pause] Well, I'm glad to be a part of the story right now. In terms of the environment of that beautiful—formerly beautiful—locale. I mean, I think visually it's still stunning, but there could be a lot more development there. It would be nice if we could have a voice in terms of choices that are made for the area as we grow in numbers and we have more of a financial base as well. We might be able to help to secure some of those lands or make—I know that there was a YMC that was going to go in there before but that got scrapped because of some financial considerations by the YMCA. It would be nice to see that we could be a part of those decision-making things and I think that's going to take more of a good listening ear when Environmental Justice League holds their meetings, more question-asking, and maybe more collaboration with other local institutions in the area so that we might be able to be a part of that development and continue the mitigation and development. Well, the mitigation is happening by Gorham and they're paying for that, but ensuring that that continues, but also seeing how the neighborhood might become more of a vibrant—that area could be more of a vibrant part of, an important aspect of community living.

Weisenberg: That's actually really interesting, and if you don't mind, I might like to talk about that a little more. So you feel like that the community—that you have sort of a voice in the community but it could be more amplified and there could be—there could be sort of more that could be done, as you spend a little longer in the neighborhood? Is that fair?

Hewson: Yes, and [pause] we need to get to know our neighbors. And I really feel like the—you could call us a commuter church. And I don't say that with any misgivings. I just say that because we want to be active in the place where our feet are walking. We need to listen more about what's happening in terms of this mitigation and development, and I don't think that people have really been that aware. So that means that certain leaders at our church, yours truly included, are going to have to be more involved in that. If we do want to have a voice in this, and I just say that because I think that it would benefit all people involved to see that type of collaboration occur. But most importantly, for the people of Providence. And as we are in Providence, we want to be for Providence. And I'm encouraged by this conversation that we can do that.

[55:26]

Weisenberg: Well, thank you for being part of the story, I guess. And it's been wonderful, and just speaking as a personal level, not in sort of oral historian mode, it's been great to just learn a little bit more about the community and the different actors and the great work that you're doing in the community.

Hewson: All glory to God for that [laughter]. I thank you for asking the questions. I think it remains to be seen if we're given more days, we'll be able to maybe see more and create more and expand more on these ideas, but you've—your questions helped clarify some of the things that [sigh, laughter] I've been thinking about, but sometimes if you don't have someone prodding you or questioning you, you tend to focus on things that might be more relevant. But this is particularly one that reminds me to give thanks for various people who are asking the questions as well as recording the stories and seeing what are the various stories in that area. So, thanks.

Weisenberg: Thank you. I guess, just to close really quickly—one more sort of idea: would you have anyone else that you'd recommend that we contact? Any suggestions for how we might be a positive actor in the community as we're working on this project?

[pause]

Hewson: Well, my understanding is incomplete in terms of the purpose for the project, so I came here kind of—I wanted to, I should have asked you specifically what the purposes of it were, but as you mention, you just wanted to get—wanted to know the relationship between our church and the neighborhood. And I've done my best to articulate that. But [pause] in terms of people in my community, the church community, I can't really name anybody who has connections with too many folks in the near neighborhood. Except for people who are friends with the Burmese folks, the people on Mitchell Street, but those folks probably don't even know that's there's this history of the factory. So, I guess I'd have to answer in the negative. [Laughter] Unfortunately.

Weisenberg: Well, that's very good to know, and I guess there's opportunities for some work in that area.

Hewson: Yes, definitely.

Weisenberg: Well, thanks so much again.

Hewson: Yeah, man.

Weisenberg: I really appreciate it.

Hewson: [inaudible]

Weisenberg: Thank you for taking the time on this beautiful day.

[Laughter]

[58:22]

[The recorder is turned off, but the conversation afterwards becomes relevant to the interview topic. The equipment is turned back on and the interview resumes, beginning at approximately 58:23].

Hewson: So you're going to have to do some serious editing.

[Laughter]

Weisenberg: You've said wonderful things. So you were making a point about the Industrial Revolution?

Hewson: Yes, well I was thinking in terms of the factory that's there. I forget the name of it prior. Do you know the name?

Weisenberg: For Gorham?

Hewson: The factory, yes. Was it called the Gorham?

Weisenberg: The Gorham Manufacturing Company.

Hewson: It was the Gorham Manufacturing Company. It's now managed by—I don't know. Well, at any rate. The Gorham factory—I don't know. I think in terms of factories throughout the world, and particularly the Industrial Revolution, and the idea was—I don't know if the idea was conceived to make profit. I mean, anyone who makes a business probably wants to make a profit of some sort, right? And create a service or a good that will help people. But it could also be self-serving, as well. But I'm just thinking in terms of when things happen and we don't look at consequences. And greed can often drive people to ignore certain consequences, and self-interest takes the greater priority than this common good of perhaps, creating goods for somebody at a cheaper price, or what have you. That's one element of the Industrial Revolution—is good. But I just think about, like, if you interviewed someone at Slater Mill, “Hey—do you know that the cotton you're using comes from the South, where—oh, look at that, there's a stain on that cotton! Do you know that the blood of a slave is on that?”

[1:00:15]

Was like, well, slavery was accepted then. So I wonder if that person in many places—I wonder if the person would have said, “Well, yes. I hope they're getting food on their table for their kids, because I've got to do this work so I can get food on the table for my kids.” Now, but, when there isn't a consciousness of environmental issues, that would be a social environment, the social environment the slave was raised in, opposed to the social and physical environment that the Gorham factory is creating—beautiful silver items, goods, that are pouring terrible, toxic things into the soil. Similar did some of the factories that continued up the Blackstone Valley. But surrounding those areas, I mean, I wouldn't call the Industrial Age—Industrial Revolution—inherently evil, but there are consequences that *are* bad. I'm not—and I think that when we look

at—we must look at consequences when we are trying to live lives. I think that when there are consequences that have generational effects such as this, where people can't enjoy this beautiful fauna and can't grow, can't have gardens, can't go for boat rides without feeling effects from it, in particular seasons, can't fish the waters. These are all environments that are a travesty, and they're an injustice. And it doesn't make me happy, and I'm just hopeful that things can change. I'm toned down in my voice. I know other people have really—in the community meetings, have really spoken up about this. They don't want to see any pain inflicted on their community because of something that happened in the mid-twentieth century. So....

Weisenberg: Exactly. They didn't—sort of a sense of, they didn't—they sort of inherited the mess. They didn't create it. They moved in later.

Hewson: Right. And I think sometimes, that is one of the sad consequences of development, is when science and progress is held up as a god, and we don't look at the human consequences or the environmental consequences because we think we can dominate nature, we can always take care of it. This is a sad consequence. But this is the age we live in, but I think the pendulum has definitely swung, thankfully. And history is—has shown—that there are terrible and tragic effects of it. I mean—so, this is part of the history that I include when I teach, and I want to raise a consciousness in my students and I think that you guys perhaps by doing this will even raise the consciousness of the neighborhood. Because we can see, look, hey, some people were not aware of this. They were doing it for—so, so without condemning them. And I think—I don't know, I'm just talking off the top of my head, I mean, but there could be a vibrant—there could have been vibrant communities, I'm sure there were, surrounding that factory. And stories that people told, God-fearing people, and they didn't realize what they were doing was—had an unintended consequence.

Weisenberg: So not quite—not quite dark satanic mills, but--

Hewson: Yeah, yeah. I--

Weisenberg: There's good and bad to everything. [Laughter]

Hewson: Who was that, that...?

Weisenberg: Think it was William Blake?

Hewson: William Blake's [inaudible]?

Weisenberg: I went to a high school that had a school song, and I went to high school in Cambridge, Massachusetts of all places.

Hewson: Yes.

Weisenberg: But there's this line about the dark satanic mills.

Hewson: Yes, that's a tune. Van Morrison must have borrowed that lyric because I've heard that in one of his songs. [Laughter] But I—not quite that, but close. I don't know what the consequences—have there been deaths attributable to this? Has the cancer rate gone up? I mean, I've seen places where asbestos has been used where, yes, there were cancers attributable to asbestos. So these are the things that need to be discussed, and people need to be made aware of. So I just hope that—I hope that we can prevent things like that, and that this place can be restored. If it means draining the lake and digging up the soil, maybe we can rally the people who have purchased it to be responsible for that. I could see a court battle brewing already. So I don't know what type of history there is in terms of those battles. But maybe I ought to talk to the lady from Environmental Justice League and ask her.

[1:05:20]

Weisenberg: So I guess you could say the church is really, you've only been there a year and a half but you're already getting to capacity and you're playing definitely an important role in the community.

Hewson: Well, I'm glad to think that we can. But I—in just my conversation with you, has realized just how limited it is, but I'm glad that we can share our space. That's what it's there for. It's for people. We definitely want to do that, but you've encouraged me just to ask more questions and see, maybe. It's discouraging, though, when—I think a lot of environmental issues such as this one are discouraging because people—there's—the damage may have already been done. But I can see there's other places where people have fought and restored places to non-brown zones and made them more viable and livable. So, that's pretty cool.

Weisenberg: So, hoping to move beyond it, from Mashapaug being a brownfields site to at least, becoming more of a vibrant place.

Hewson: Yes. How many hundreds of years was it a non-brown zone before? And now we're looking at it—200 years from now, or twenty years from now, what could potentially happen? I mean, one step at a time. Maybe create, go back to how it was originally created. I mean, then, I don't know if that's going to mean kicking out all of the European-Americans [laughter] who moved in, because that's a whole other issue. Because—I don't think any of us are innocent, though. [Laughter] Wow, I can't believe I just said that.

Weisenberg: It's great—it's wonderful. Sometimes, to be perfectly honest, I think those sort of things myself.

Hewson: Well, the natives were immigrants too, I mean, the Native Americans immigrated here themselves.

Weisenberg: Exactly.

Hewson: They were the first people. But I don't think that they were putting toxic waste into the area.

Weisenberg: That's actually something I've been hearing about, is that apparently this was a very important communal site and that they had—there was a big reunion there in the 1930s for Native American communities.

Hewson: Really, wow. Oh, what a shame. I mean, that's good for them—what a shame that it hasn't been continued. Wow. Well, thanks for that info.

Weisenberg: Well, thank you again.

Hewson: You're welcome.

[End of Interview: 1:07:47]