

Ralph Simmons
Mashapaug Pond Oral History Interview

March 13, 2013

John Nicolas Brown Center, 357 Benefit Street, Providence, RI 02912

Interviewee: Ralph Simmons

Interviewer: Abigail Ettelman

[Bracketed words] indicate action. **[Numbers]** are time-codes corresponding with the audio, marked approximately every 5 minutes.

Part 1:

AE: [0:00] So there we go, it should be recording, one moment, I have to put my headphones in so that I can check the sound. There we go. All right. So, I'm just going to officially start, which is- I'm just going to say that my name is Abigail Ettelman, I am interviewing Ralph Simmons at the John Nicholas Brown Center for the Public Humanities. It is March 13, 2013, and it is about 12:15 in the afternoon. So thank you for coming very very much. You were telling me some very interesting stories about Mashapaug and how your family got there. Would you mind repeating that or just saying why you lived in the area?

RS: The reason I lived in Mashapaug Pond was because my grandfather migrated from South Carolina to Boston to Providence and the family, my immediate family, came along with my grandfather to Providence. My grandfather was a minister and he was establishing churches. He established a church in Providence from my residence in Providence on Salem Street in the West End. We moved to the Mashapaug Pond area. I lived on Cranston Street in the Mashapaug Pond area across the tracks. I lived on Pacific Avenue across the tracks. I lived on Vanzandt Street, which is two blocks away from the Mashapaug Pond itself.

AE: Oh!

RS: I was very much impressed when I look back upon my experience of the Mashapaug Pond area because it meant so much in my life when I realized that the experience that I had at Mashapaug Pond because we had an ideal family situation especially for blacks. We had individual homes, we had people that knew each other, in fact, in one of my writings, I could write the number of almost fifty people that I knew in the Mashapaug Pond area and the West End area of the city. To know this number of people that are in your community is very unusual because sometimes you don't even know the person that lives next door to you so - but - the Mashapaug Pond area was a very unique area. It was primarily black home-owners that took pride in their property and that knew each other. I could name, even now, I meet individuals that lived in the Mashapaug Pond area and one of the conversations that we have is about the old times in Mashapaug Pond and what we did and where we lived and about the situation of having a community of primarily black homeowners. It's a situation that you just don't find in these days there. It was an ideal situation for a person to bring up children, going

to school, of course it - back in the 30s was a period of discrimination, but in spite of that we just had a very enjoyable period. It was a very enjoyable period in my life that I just relish when I think about it. [4:59]

AE: That's so wonderful. When you meet up with people that you lived near and that you were friends with there and you talk about the "good old times," are there any stories in particular that come up often?

RS: Well, as far as Mashapaug Pond itself, we often talk about the time before it was polluted by Gorham Manufacturing and my brothers and I, of course we were young at that time and we could swim across the pond and back. We had swimming there every day and the beaches, which you would never think of doing now. Also, I remember when the iceman would go on the pond in the middle of winter with his horse and wagon and large saw and cut ice blocks on the pond there. Of course, all of this is years ago before - and it's not possible to do that now. My family is a very religious family and our church and other churches held baptism services at the pond. I remember that very well. Also, I remember some of the tragedies when people were drowned at the pond. Young people, there. Because one of the reasons for- the beach area was shallow, but previous to that there were cellars, spots where you could walk for a short distance from the shore and there was a deep fall-off, where you could fall off, and so some of the times it was tragic there. But for the most part it was just a very enjoyable place to live and enjoyable experience to be there and I think the most enjoyable part too that I can think of is I remember back about Mashapaug Pond is the relationship we had with our neighbors and community aspect of the whole area. As I mentioned before, you could just name the people, you could just walk up and down the street, you'd know everyone, you'd know their children, you could do this for blocks at a time, you know, not just your next door neighbor or the person on your street. And fortunately, even at my age I'm in communication with several of the people that I grew up with at Mashapaug Pond. I'm a avid golfer and the foursome that I play with regularly are all members of the former Mashapaug Pond area there. It was just an area that I loved that brings back fond memories when I think about it.

AE: So when you moved, was it very sad? Or were you excited?

RS: I moved from the Mashapaug area before they demolished the area for the industrial park. My father bought a house in East Providence and we moved into this house about 1940. Was quite an experience in moving, because when we moved there, there was a certain amount of discrimination by one of the neighbors who was very influential in the city of East Providence. They did not want us to move there, but through the efforts of my real estate agent, bought the property for us. Unfortunately, the lady of this property was a school teacher at the high school that I went to and for the first time in my career as a student, I had a failing grade in her subject period- it was social studies. [laughs] I've always been a good student because education interests me. [10:50] She happened to be my teacher and oh boy, that was [laughs] too bad. I'd just like to say, which has nothing to do with Mashapaug Pond though, but my first wife passed away - cancer - and she was only 41 but I mention her because she fostered this education desire in me to her children, these are her children, she was a graduate of Pembroke, which is the girl's section of Brown at that time. She went on to obtain her master's degree at Harvard University and this was at the time when not too many females or minorities, especially, received their degrees at that time. It was more of a

male situation at Harvard. She returned to Brown University and received her doctor's degree and she was a child psychologist. For this reason, I was so very much intrigued with education through the relationship with my wife that I was just determined to have my boys graduate. I just mention that because even in my life experience which would include Mashapaug Pond, it also includes my relationship as a parent of my children. I think Mashapaug Pond area was one that we probably won't see again because the situation, the conditions, are different, even with the minorities. For people, either minorities or any group to have a total community together where people know each other, where there's a relationship and fellowship, it's something that just doesn't exist today. It's not positive or negative, it's just the way things are. You know? [laughs]

AE: Do you think there's a particular reason why things are different now?

RS: I think that the reason now is because time's are different. Times are different. People are different. The ambition, the desires, whatever that people are - the things that people are engaged in, the outlook, you know, at time it was where the mothers, the ladies, stayed at home and took care of the children, they weren't engaged in working situations which is- it's just a different period of time that [trails off]... I think that this Mashapaug Pond era was something very unique. I think especially for blacks it was unique, because once they broke up the Mashapaug Pond area, the city of Providence, of course, they were looking for financial gain, once they broke that area up they also broke up the Randall Square area up, the East side area, and they created the South Providence area, and by creating the South Providence area, the situation was just not the same. South Providence is not noted for the conditions that you had in the Mashapaug Pond area. [16:00]

AE: When your children were growing up, did you wish they had something like the pond or relationships like you had when you were living around the pond?

RS: Not really, because I realized that with my children, it was different. My children grew up in East Providence and I think we have a wonderful community in East Providence. The Mashapaug Pond area, I don't think it will ever come back. Situations, conditions, ambitions are different. I don't think it would return, but it's something that brings back fond memories though.

AE: Absolutely.

RS: Mm hmm.

AE: One question that I have actually is about the pollution- which you sort of mentioned a little bit earlier, saying that it wasn't polluted when you were there. Did you ever - when you heard about it, when you heard about the pollution later on, how did that make you feel?

RS: Really I think the pollution came well after I had left the Mashapaug area, because I remember the Mashapaug area as when they, like I mentioned before, they were cutting ice, you know. Of course, in a polluted pond, you'd never cut ice! [laughs] So really, for me to look back on the difference, I really didn't think about it.

AE: Absolutely.

RS: Because I was so far gone from the period at the time, when Gorham was having so much trouble. And then as I said when we were younger we would swim back and forth across the pond there, which you'd never do [laughs] in a polluted pond there. So I probably couldn't answer that too well.

AE: That's fine. No, absolutely. So, the people that - do you know anyone who still lives in the area today? Obviously not where you grew up, but around the pond.

RS: Oh yes yes, very much so. I know one of my good friends is a councilman now at - Jennings, he lived next door to me at Pacific Avenue. Across the street from me, of course he's deceased now, was Andrew Bell, who has the Bell Funeral Home. He lived across the street from me. I have - I play golf and the head of my golf club is a - anyway, I see him everyday. The group that I play with- I play with four fellows and three of them were former members of the Mashapaug Pond community. I see quite a few of them, yes.

AE: For the people who live in different areas now that you still see, do they act- do they feel (that you know, if you talk about it) - how do they feel about where they live now? As opposed to where they used to live? **[20:21]**

RS: Well, like I said I did call a few of them and just to get a consensus of how they felt about the uniqueness of the Pond Street area - of the Mashapaug Pond area - and I think it - if I could read this? During the thirties, it was the one area in the city that was primarily a residential area for blacks. Those who lived there owned their own homes, had a moderate income, and knew everyone. The pride of the whole community brings living together as a family is what made the Mashapaug Pond area so unique. And I think the whole uniqueness of it was that you had so many people that - so many families that lived in this particular community that you knew them and knew about them and you knew their children. You could go up and down the street and you know it's something that just doesn't happen too often in today's society. It's very ... I not only extend it the Mashapaug Pond area, which was perhaps defined by the area of the railroad tracks, but it extended to the greater part of West Elmwood at that time because you know just going to school and associating and playing with the people in the area, it was just something that you just don't find. You play with the children next door, across the street, or something, but when you look at the whole area that's like one large family, that is the uniqueness that I see of the Mashapaug Pond area.

AE: So-

RS: Oh yes and (here's the?) picture I brought of the baptism?

AE: Oh yes!

RS: I will say that I am a religious person and my family is religious and one of the things that I perhaps would like to mention was that the baptism services that we held at Pond Street Baptist Church. I know that we would have the full service, we would have the choirs, we would have the, what we call the Spoken Word, and we would have a great fellowship and it was not only the Pond Street Baptist Church, of which I am a part, but it was other churches and other churches that baptized, they would use the pond for the same reason. And it was just a nice area, the whole Mashapaug Pond area.

AE: So how frequently would there be baptisms like this?

RS: Really, it depended upon when the church would have candidates for baptism, so it wasn't a regular scheduled event but it happened often enough. Not only the baptisms, but also they had picnics and outings and contests and sporting events. They had a ball field there and had a black baseball team that was very good that played throughout the city. Mashapaug Pond was their home field. This lasted for some time, then they had the football team too, the Raiders, and some of those people I still see quite often.

[25:56] I think it's many of the blacks, the older persons in the city now, many of them came from the Mashapaug Pond area when the city developed the housing, I mean the industrial park there, and when these people left, they are still in the Providence area, just not in the Mashapaug Pond area. I don't know, the city had their reason for it **[laughs]** as they have their reason for doing other things. It was a sad day because it's something you just can't recoup- a situation like this. You know, when it's gone, it's gone **[laughs]** and it can't be recovered. So uh, what...

AE: If you wouldn't mind talking a bit more about your family and you mentioned how your family had gotten to the area, but what I'm curious about is how your family felt about moving. So, how, when your family decided to go from one place to the other to the other and then fully out of the area of Mashapaug entirely, was it just sort of something that happened or was it sad, not sad, but was it emotional? Or was it exciting?

RS: The reason, as I say, the reason we moved from Mashapaug Pond, I was still young at that time and my father just made the decision to buy some property in East Providence. This is the reason we moved, primarily. At that time, there were five children in our family at that time and I had a brother that's two years younger than myself and I had a sister that's ten years younger. I would mention that my sister when we moved to the Mashapaug Pond area, our first house that we lived in was across the tracks. This was the dividing line for Mashapaug Pond area as against West Elmwood area and my sister was born right on the house on the - on Cranston Street, on the other side of the tracks, which made her a Mashapaug Pond **[laughs]**. I - one of the interesting parts about this movement, when we lived there, we lived right adjacent to the railroad tracks, in fact you could look down upon the trains from where- from our house. And when we first moved there, to get accustomed to those trains, especially at night the freight trains, the long trains, the noise that they made, it took a little while to get accustomed to it. But after a while, you slept through it. So my sister was born there, I had a brother that was about eight years older than my sister and I'm two years older than my brother. But we were as a family we went to school in the Mashapaug Pond area, myself I didn't go to school there. I went to school on the other side of the West Elmwood, the elementary school and I went to the junior high school **[31:03]** and the high school in the Providence area. I think, as I said, we moved - in the Mashapaug Pond area, as I said, we lived in the Cranston Street and I lived on Vanzendt Street, which is a few blocks over, then I lived in Pacific Avenue and Pacific Avenue when I lived there, I was only perhaps two blocks from the pond itself **[pen falls, he laughs]**. We grew up almost, you know, the pond, it's something we would go to every day - summertime, of course, go to every day, go swimming every day, you know, it was just ideal location for any family to live with, they could have recreation available as against being in the center city or something, but this was perhaps another advantage for the community itself because we not only had the individual houses but we had the recreation areas there, we had the pond there, we had beside the pond, there was a large open area for baseball, whatever **[laughs]** kids to run around and we didn't have any large stores there that I can - we would have to go outside of the area for shopping other than corner store, food stores. I'm trying to think of some of the other things that we did in the Mashapaug Pond area but it was just a beautiful community and as I reflect back on it, I can't help but think that "wouldn't it be nice if we had more

communities like that.” You know, it’s modern day, but the ability of people to gather together, to keep a community, to know each other, to know people, not only the people that live a few houses from you, but the whole neighborhood, you know, it’s almost like sometimes you go into the country [laughs] you know, you’re not disturbed with a whole lot of heavy traffic and all of this. I think one of the things that I cited was I lived on Pacific Avenue, and we as children, we could go out in the street and play these games like hide and seek games or we had one game we called “peggy.” I don’t know whether you’ve ever heard of that- yes. This was a game where you made a circle, perhaps about six foot diameter, you took a broomstick, you cut off the end, about six inches, and you sharpen it on either end, then you took a stick- oh, perhaps about two feet long, and you put this peggy, we called it the peggy, this little thing, you put it on the ground and then you hit it on the sharpened end so when you did that it would jump straight up in the air and then when it went up in the air, you would hit it like a baseball [35:49] okay? And you would hit it as far as you can. So we had someone out in the field like in baseball and this person would throw the peggy into this circle and the closer to the circle within this circle, so many points, we’re doing that. And we would have teams and we could just play this for hours and hours and the thing about it was in the streets there you could play for an hour without a car passing by [laughs]. You could play right out in the middle of the street. Any other game there, you wouldn’t have to worry about the traffic or anything. That and other games there that I’d like to remember some of them there but you can think of other things that we did in those days that really would be more difficult, especially playing in the street, playing in the yards. But we had fun. [laughs]

AE: It certainly sounds fun.

RS: Yes.

AE: So when you were playing those games, were you playing just with friends or were your siblings invited as well?

RS: Oh, playing with friends for the most part. Neighbors, like I say, with the community you knew. So many people and so many children your age. This was a game that perhaps would identify the children as maybe 8, 10, 12 years old, something like that. If they’re too young, they wouldn’t take the game seriously and they [laughs], and if they’re too old, they wouldn’t be interested in that type of a game. But it was nice and then we had things- I’m trying to think of things that we do now that we didn’t in those days. I remember we would all make these scooters - you’d take skates and take the skates apart and nail them, a board, maybe a four inch board, nail the skates to a board, and then nail one upright and that was our scooter. Today, you go to Toys R Us [laughs]. You don’t - we did that and we made our wagons too. You just secure some wheels, maybe from a baseball, I mean a wheelbarrow, some other kind of garden tools, get the wheelbarrow. You would make the things you would play with and it was unusual to go to the store and buy some of these things because for the most part you couldn’t find them in the stores [laughs]. I can think of so many things we used to do. One of the things we used to do, we walked a lot. It was before the family had these cars, especially with these teenagers having cars, before we just walked and I think it was perhaps a more healthy condition for the people, for the children to walk in places. Now, as far as television was concerned, I think - if I remember - I think I was in high school before I saw the first television [41:01]. And this would be in ... Somewhere in

the... Forties, early forties. And I remember the first television I ever saw, my younger brother, he was two years younger than myself, he's little more daring than I am and he went to the store, and at that time they were trying to sell the regular television and they would let you loan the television, assuming you were going to buy it. Didn't buy it, you'd bring it back, you know, so the first time I saw a television, is my younger brother brought this television to the house and showed it a couple of times and my mother told him to take it back because she would have to be the one that paid for it, you know, not him. So this was in - I was at least in high school, first time I saw a television. Now I remember - and radio, I was a young boy the first time I saw a radio, but the first radio I ever heard, we had the ear plugs. I mean, that thing, yes. We didn't have a box, course we had them, but I wasn't familiar with them, first time we saw them. First time I saw a movie, and this goes back to 1929, something like that, it was black and white and it wasn't talking [laughs] it was I guess the first time I saw a movie was 1929, but it was a silent movie and, oh I forget the name of the picture but they had it for several years there. I was still at this time at West Elmwood, in the Mashapaug Pond area, later on of course, computers and this, we'd never heard of them. But I was just trying to... Let's see, the radio, the television, the movies, I remember the first time ... Al Jolson or something, anyway. That was -

AE: That was great. Thank you.

RS: [laughs] I can remember the first movie that I saw.

AE: Where did you go see it? Where was the theater?

RS: I was in South Carolina.

AE: Oh!

RS: Yes, that was years ago. But technology moves so fast. I had my 90th birthday in September and one of the gifts that was given to me was the iPad, yes. So now I have a mini iPad. I don't have the slightest idea what to do with it! [laughs]

AE: This is where your children come in, 'cause they can teach you!

RS: I think that one of the advantages of reaching old age is to look back, not only on Mashapaug Pond, but look back upon so many experiences that you've had during your lifetime. Like I say, Mashapaug Pond is one of the highlights of my life - of course, I was young then and perhaps an older person would look at it a little different, but to me it was a beautiful period in my life. And as we grow, I think in my writings, I would say the most memorable period of Mashapaug Pond era was the 1938 hurricane. Because when that hurricane happened, we were at home, and previous to that we had never had anything- [audio cuts out] **[46:20]**.

Part 2: Interview continues on different machine; same date, time, and place.

AE: **[0:00]** So we're going to start- think it's going, but if you don't mind I'm just going- so here we go, starting again. It is March 13th, 2013, my name is Abigail Ettelman, this is part two of a continued interview with Ralph Simmons. So thank you very much for [ignoring] that weird pause and allowing me to move on to a different format. So what you were saying is you were telling us, telling me, about the hurricane of '38.

RS: Yes, the hurricane of 1938 was something that we weren't- I wasn't familiar with hurricanes and this type of weather. I don't even think the weatherman was that familiar, in the 1939, people weren't as familiar with hurricanes because we had not experienced

anything that severe in Rhode Island. But when the hurricane occurred, I guess our family just went in the cellar and waited it out. So what happened after the hurricane- we really didn't have much damage to our property but next day I walked downtown and at that time walking downtown from Mashapaug area, that was a pretty healthy walk [laughs] but being young, I thought nothing of it, just to see what the damage had done and it was amazing you know to see cars overturned, buildings were destroyed, some of the brick buildings, you know the side had just fallen down and then they - one of the buildings that I know of had a water mark on it and this was eight feet of water in the down town Providence. So it was a terrible situation. It was something that we just hadn't experienced before and weren't familiar with and I think when I wrote this paper, I said, the thing that I remember most about that 1938 hurricane, the stores had hurricane sales. [laughs] And because the losses the stores had, they collected insurance and when they collected insurance, then they could sell at the low low price, practically nothing, you know, just to get rid of the stuff, lot of it was water damaged there, and I remember some of the serious good sale [laughs]. But something so disastrous as a hurricane, probably should remember more than just the sales that occurred but that's what I remember about it. Walking downtown. After the hurricane, I think it was a lot different in the - there seemed to be a big difference in the community, I don't know. Other people weren't as fortunate, some people really suffered, you know. Course you know being a low income community, you know, good number of people just didn't have insurance or something. It really made a change in the people who had such pride in their homes and so forth. I think that after the hurricane and after the changes that we had, we had a community that seemed to be a little different. Because the hurricane was '38 and, like I said, I moved in, like I said, '39, '40 - not that long after. I really don't know - probably could find out easy - when they made the industrial park there. It was quite a few years later. I had moved out of Mashapaug Pond area by that time there so I probably couldn't comment too much about the transition because I had other [laughs] other things. But I do have so many friends now that lived in that Mashapaug Pond area that I see regularly. [6:38] Plus you know my age or younger and it's the topic of conversation quite often about the Huntington avenue area and where we lived and the experiences we had and the people that we knew and were there and are gone, because that's a topic that comes up because at our age you're losing a lot of people. I don't know, I had some of the people that lived close to me that moved to East Providence. That was one of the things, the consequences of breaking up the Mashapaug Pond area, how people scattered, and you just lost this community atmosphere or whatever you would call it. It would bring about new experiences for us.

AE: How did people keep in touch? After - if people scattered, as you say. Did they try to stay in touch and if so how?

RS: Some did but then Providence isn't very large, so. You know, it's really not that difficult, even though - unless they moved out of the Providence area, which a great number did. It's different but one's that lived in the Providence area, it'd take about half an hour. [laughs] So you'd see them again and again one of the means of communication was through the churches. There are half a dozen predominantly black churches and many of the church people attend these churches, so you see them not only in their church but if the church is having a special occasion where other churches join them, then you see them there. At one time, they - and this goes back to the

Mashapaug Pond area - would have a big celebration, it was always August 1st, which was the emancipation, black emancipation day, and they would have a big celebration that used to be at Crescent Park and then used to be at Goddard Park where a lot of these people, the church people and the gathering of the Mashapaug Pond people, you'd meet them there for the celebrations, but they no longer have those now. A lot of people go about their own.

AE: Have you been back to the area? To Mashapaug?

RS: Oh yes.

AE: How does that feel, going back after having lived there and then having that having been such a long time ago? [11:11]

RS: Well, I think I've been back a couple of times trying to identify exactly where I lived when I lived there. And to tell the truth, it's almost impossible. [laughs] It has changed so so much, you know. But I've been back there and I've been back there for business elsewhere. Some of the radio stations have their headquarters there and you know different things there. But it's different. You can't help from telling the difference. I think the Mashapaug Pond as we knew it is smaller and of course they don't have a beach or anything and they don't have the ball fields. It's just altogether different. I don't know, it just leaves fond memories of what used to be.

AE: And when you get together with your golfing buddies, you tell the stories.

RS: [laughs] Tell the stories, yup.

AE: That sounds nice.

RS: Like I said, last night I called a few of my friends to get their input on what they thought about the Mashapaug Pond area and you know, for the most part, they were like myself, it's just fond memories of what used to be and I guess for the most part, the ones that I talk to are my age or younger, so their experience would be the same.

AE: Are there any not-so-fond memories? I mean, if you feel like talking about it.

RS: Not really. The ones that I talked to, not really.

AE: That's great. Very soothing (?).

RS: Or they dismissed them or either something personal, you know. So tell me, what exactly is this project that we're talking about?

AE: Good question! Essentially the project is an audio tour around the pond. Hopefully what we'll do is create signage, put signs around the pond, so that when someone goes to the pond, they'll see the sign and be able to use their smartphone to listen to a particular recording - people's memories about the pond, the way things were used, so the baptism might be something we could use because with the way people treat the pond now you know, it's so polluted, you wouldn't go in, it's hard to get up to and to, people don't use it very much. We're hoping to sort of create, obviously we haven't done it yet so it might change, but my hope is that we'll create a picture about how it used to be used and what life used to be like around it, and how that connects to the way people use it today. So obviously you don't live around the pond anymore so maybe you don't use it directly today, but some people do and they might have interesting stories about how they use it without using it. Without, you know, hurting themselves. So it's an interesting project.

RS: What would be interesting to me, now that Gorham isn't there polluting the pond, just what did they do with that area, other than the industrial park, would it be possible to rehabilitate it to a park area with the pond and swimming or whatever or either you

know whatever facilities, clam bake, you know- would it be possible to take one portion of the pond and make it an area for the public? [16:22]

AE: I think- that's an interesting question- because I think they're trying. For example, Textron is now the owner of the site and is in charge of making the site not polluted, essentially remediating it. So there's a small portion that has been done and that's where Alvarez High School is and that's where it was essentially the most polluted because that's where Gorham's essentially dumped out everything in the little cove area. But of course, that little cove area influenced the rest of the pond influenced the rest of the waterways that its connected to... So it's a big job that they're still working on. I think the hope, for our project and for people who are involved in something similar called the Urban Pond Procession which is basically a local community organization where people want to bring attention to the fact that the pond is here, it's important, it's special, it's incredibly large, it could definitely be used and we hope that it will be someday but before it can be used again it has to be fixed and cleaned, depending on how you think of it, or even people won't be able to go in the water, but they can use the parks. Because there are a few green spaces around the park.

RS: Picnic area.

AE: Exactly. So we're just hoping that, as you said thing's are different today, people don't always know that the pond is there. And if people don't know that the pond is there, it's not going to get used. We're hoping to bring attention to the fact that it's around and through bringing attention to the fact that it's here, people will be more interested in pushing for it to be rehabilitated. So, I mean, I think that's a great question and I hope so.

RS: I was just thinking of the Fox Point area, on the other side, on the waterside. That's a relatively small area but they made a park there and it's used, it's always crowded, I mean, it's a small area but is developed there and Mashapaug Pond area is much larger and something similar to that. People don't go swimming there in the Providence River.

AE: No.

RS: But they do use the park, you know, picnics and - I know the Cape Verdeans have their assemblies there. It's certainly there for things of that natures.

AE: Actually, that's very close to where I live -

RS: Oh!

AE: So, I use that area! But that's really true. It's a small area that has been rehabilitated. So maybe that is a model for what could happen. It's actually funny because one of the great things about Mashapaug is that it's so large and beautiful, but at the same time it's so large and beautiful that there isn't a center, so all of Fox Point can go to India Point and spend time there because we know it's there and it's sort of that one area so it does become that community center, the way that you were saying, but with Mashapaug, it's so big.

RS: So big, yes.

AE: That it's hard to create one little area. I do know that Holly - Holly Ewald, one of the professors of the class I'm in and she is the director of the Urban Pond Procession, so she is very involved in this, and I know that she is really hoping that we'll be able to create a walking path all around the pond. And I think that would be a good step, just to

make it accessible. [laughs] Because all of the stories that you're telling are amazing. They're so great and it shows that this area can be so- [20:55]

RS: It's vital and the area I was just thinking about, Blackstone Boulevard, you walk and walk and walk, but that would be so inviting for people if they could make a bike path around the pond with perhaps a small center for recreation or picnicking. Bike paths are very popular. [laughs]

AE: Yes, they are! Biking is so nice!

RS: Bike paths, walking paths.

AE: Picnics- people like to eat. Put a space where there can be food and people will eat there. [laughs]

RS: That's right- hot dog stands, ice cream stands [laughs].

AE: Yes! I would go there. That sounds delicious. Um- let me check the time. Oh- 1:30, how did that happen? My goodness. All right. Thank you so much for coming in. I don't want to end this more quickly than this needs to be ended, so: do you have anything else that you should tell me or that we should talk about?

RS: Mmm no.

AE: All right, let me just make sure that I didn't forget to ask about anything. [hums]

RS: How did they identify the extent of the Mashapaug pond area? Is it the railroad tracks or did they go into West Elmwood?

AE: It's the railroad tracks, pretty much. It's um sort of like- I'm making a weird [diamond] shape with my hands right now, but it's sort of the railroad tracks and... I can't remember, route 10? It's pretty much Reservoir, is what we're focused on, the Reservoir Triangle, but we do have people who are more involved in Elmwood and other areas, because as you were saying, you grew up in this area but have all these other experiences with people and areas and that's had an influence on your life, so we're talking about Mashapaug as the center of our project, but it's not, you know, "Oh, you live on the East Side? You never actually lived around Mashapaug? We can't talk to you." For example, last round there was an interview done with Tall Oak Weedan who is a Wampanoag person. I don't know if he's ever actually lived around the pond, but his interview was really really interesting.

RS: I think the Weedans... Yes, I knew a family that lived on, I think it was Burlington Street that runs parallel with the railroad tracks and they also moved to East Providence.

AE: So, did that happen for a lot of people, they just went east, when there was the reconstruction of the area?

RS: No, they just scattered and a good number of people moved to South Providence because of the discrimination. It's only so many places they could move to and in doing so it developed South Providence. The city of Providence is what developed South Providence because it limited where people could move. Certainly couldn't move on Blackstone Boulevard, that's for sure. [laughs] So yes they tore up the Mashapaug Pond area and they did the Randall Square area and they went over the East Side and tore that up- as people scattered, they moved to where they could move. A lot of people moved to East Providence but a lot of people, talking about economics, just couldn't go out and buy a house, you know [laughs]. They had to go where their pocket book would allow them to go. That's one of the reasons why even South Providence, I know when it was mostly Jewish and Irish, because my mother in law lived up Doyle Avenue and I

knew people who lived in Willard Avenue, that was good shopping, but as the blacks moved in, the whites moved out. In fact, one of my church experiences, as a church we would go into the community and really knock on doors and really let people know there was a church here and this was when we first moved there [26:40], I went to one house with my little nephew to talk about the church and that it was there and as soon as he saw the young boy he forgot about what we were there for, he said "Will you go and buy me a pack of cigarettes?" [laughs] I knocked on another door, remember this elderly couple there, I guess the black family had just moved across the street and this lady was like in prison, she was afraid to go out of her house, you know? [laughs] She had some of her relatives bring the food in, but she was like in jail. [clear throat] The whole community changed there.

AE: Interesting.

RS: Now it's beginning to change again because a lot of Latinos are moving in.

AE: Absolutely.

RS: So, I guess at that time, South Providence or Mashapaug Pond, there was no such thing as Latinos or Chinese or Asians. [laughs]

AE: Actually, it's funny- I just did a demographic project about that area and it's true that that's a relatively recent development.

RS: Time marches on.

AE: Everything changes. Except for this building.

RS: Yes, this is a beautiful building.

AE: But even that, when I first came here, I thought everything had stayed the same since 1820 and then did some research and reading and many of the buildings were brought here.

RS: Oh.

AE: It changes too.

RS: Okay, well I won't...

AE: No! Please, take up my time, this is amazing. And frankly, I'd rather do this than my homework. Looking for my pen, where did I throw it? Oh. So, if you wouldn't mind, there are two forms right here. One is just that and I can read it to you or you can read it to yourself. So that would be your name in print right there.

RS: Print my name?

AE: Mmhmm. And then - I can fill that part out and then you would just say -

RS: "Interviewed by"

AE: Sign your name right there and then I can- I'll sign there. [muffled] ... stealing a pen from Annie - which I probably shouldn't have admitted to while the tape was still running. All right. So I will take this and you will just sign your name - print your name right here. There we go. And then now if you could sign your name right here... Now. Before we finish, is there anything that you would like to take out of the recording? So if you mentioned something you don't feel comfortable sharing with everyone, 'cause this is going to go online [RS laughs], I can take that out. And if you think of anything later on, that you would like to take out, you know, you think about it and your sister says "oh, don't ..."

RS: If you asked me what I said in this recording [laughs], wouldn't even - probably wouldn't even remember! [32:00]

AE: [laughs] I'm giving you my name and number so that -

RS: Well, I appreciate that.

AE: No problem. This way, if you think of anything later, you can call me and tell me about that. If you think of something you don't want, whatever, you can tell me about that. And also, would you like me to send you a transcript of the interview? I can do that.

RS: Yes, if you will, please.

AE: Great. So I'll send it to you in the mail? [muttering 2-0-7 while writing down own number for RS) All right. So-

RS: And you have my address?

AE: Yes, it's in the... In the this. [gestures to bio form] The biographical information. So as long as that's all the same.

RS: [brings out photo of he and his wife] My wife and I [laughs].

AE: Oh, that's so nice! Oh, thank you so much for bringing those in. That's really fantastic.

RS: That was - I know it's not part of the interview, but my wife and I, we could almost write a book, a movie of how we met.

AE: Really?

RS: My wife lived in Brazil. She was familiar with a family in Brazil, the lady was married, I don't know how they got married, but anyway, she was married to this person in Boston, he was one of the - I don't know whether you'd call them account managers for the Gillette blade - and his territory was all of South America. And so he anchored in Rio and he anchored in Boston. And so my wife came up with this family from Brazil to Boston with them. This was right after the war, so one of the fellow that I was in the service with was going to Boston and he asked me to go with him and I go to Boston with him, they were having - at the International Institute a tea, I don't know whether you're familiar with teas - okay. Well, teas, churches used to have them a lot, you get together and they serve tea and chit chat, and so forth. Well, anyway, they use a big long table and one person at one end would pour the tea and you'd have music. But anyway, she was sitting at the table when this fellow took me to the International Institute. She looked pretty good. He knew her, he introduced me to her. So, she stayed in Boston right near the Commons on Vernon Street there, I got to know her pretty well, used to go back and forth to Boston, back and forth to Boston. So one night she called me - this is a short story - one night she called me and asked me if I would come up to Boston because the family wanted to talk to me, you know. Next day I came up to Boston and they were all sitting around in front and said, "Do you want to marry Alcinera?"

AE: Oh my goodness!

RS: Well you know, we had never even talked about anything!

AE: Oh my goodness.

RS: So I stuttered and stammered, but what it was was he was getting ready to go back to Brazil, back to Rio. And when he brought her up, he had to sign for her. Now, if I wanted to marry her and pay \$500 for what he put out, I guess, she could stay here and we'd stay married. Otherwise, he would have to take her back to Brazil, you know.

AE: Wow.

RS: So that's why he asked me if I wanted to marry her. I was dumbfounded, I didn't know what to say. Now in the meantime, this friend and I had planned to drive out to California and back, but at the last minute, he couldn't get the time off from his job so I

drove myself, drove all the way out there the northern route, you know, Detroit, Chicago, [37:06] came out through Sacramento into San Francisco, came down into Los Angeles, came back the southern route there. So when I got back, the first thing I did was look for this girl, you know. Went to the house, house is empty, she's gone. The whole family, you know. And I you know had addresses of where her sister lived. I called and called and no response so years went by and in the meantime I married this girl I grew up with, you know. And you know like I mentioned before she had her educational experience, but she died from cancer, she was only 41 years old, she died from cancer, and I had two boys, the youngest boy was a year and ten months old, the other one was three or four years old. So one reason I'm a Christian now, because let me tell you, those two years [laugh]. But what happened, I went back to Boston, I was visiting this same friend that introduced me to the girl, now he asked me "had I seen or heard anything from her?" Well, I had completely forgotten about her. But when my wife died, I wrote to her. I had two or three addresses to write to and surprisingly she answered. We had this for a whole year, we had this correspondence back and forth. Now, at the time, I was working for the government and one of the wars, Korea, one of the wars was going on, so I was in this secret department and the minute I told them I was interested in this, engaged with this girl from Brazil, oh boy, you know they just had a fit. They moved me out of that secret area. Make a long story short, after a period of time, not that long, we became engaged through letters. Now, I had not seen my wife for fifteen years so we arranged for her to come to the United States. That was another challenge because at that time if you were Latin or Chinese, Asian or something, it was difficult to get into the country. Europe, no problem, but Africa, forget it. But anyway, so she came to the United States and at that particular day I went out to church service with the two boys and next door, when I came home I saw these bags in my walkway. I said "Oh gee, finally-" I had so much trouble, trying to get permission for her to come in, so I thought they had forwarded the bags but I stood there looking at the bags, getting ready to take them into the house, but then she walked out of the house the next door. She had come from the airport to my house by taxi, you know, she was [laughs]. And I wasn't at home, so she went next door, you know the people next door saw her. Well, I had not seen my wife for fifteen years. My mother lived next door, she lived with my mother for a week, and we had made the marriage preparations and so forth, and we were married. And like I say, my youngest son was a year and ten months and my oldest one was about four years old. She just came in, she took over, and brought the boys up. They're beautiful children now, my oldest one, he's an account executive at a radio station in Washington [42:00] and my youngest one, he's a project manager in San Francisco. He's really big time there because he was the director of the San Francisco Housing Authority and then he went out on his own and has his own business. And because he was director before and because they had a black mayor, they just fed him a [line?] so he has no problem. He's doing a lot of College Bound - have you ever heard of College Bound?

AE: Sounds familiar.

RS: Yeah. No- not College Bound, College Track.

AE: Oh yes. I think- yes.

RS: Okay. He's been building a series of those buildings in Los Angeles, he just finished building one in San Francisco and what College Track is is kids from minority

neighborhoods, they have really good after school college lessons, they teach them about doing grants, filling out papers, necessary stuff, finding out information about college, the whole nine yards. That would lead them onto college and then they help them get into the college. So he's been working on these things. But -

AE: That's really impressive.

RS: Yes, I give my wife sometimes her Brazilian [laughs] kicks up there, but you can't help thanking someone that came in and filled in.

AE: That's an amazing story.

RS: Sometimes we talk about our past and how we met and how we, so forth. So now we've been married for almost 45 years.

AE: Wow! That's amazing.

RS: Yes. But we still have, just like this Mashapaug Pond, we have an illustrious...

AE: Yes, that is so true.

RS: Thank you so much.

AE: No, thank you so much! [sound gets more muffled as we prepare to leave] This was an amazing interview. Thank you for coming in, finding your way here, letting me keep you a very long time [both laugh]...

RS: And finding a parking space on Benefit Street.

AE: Oh god, yes, those are the worst. Those are the worst.

RS: Yes, parking around Brown University is a challenge. My niece, my sister that I mentioned, my sister's ten years [younger] than me, my niece is the... I don't know if she's the Director of Human Relations at Brown University...

AE: I think I actually spoke with her, she's originally-

RS: Wendy.

AE: Yes! She's the original contact person who said you might be interested, so I called her to tell her that you were doing an interview. She's very excited.

RS: Yes, oh yes.

AE: I might actually be interviewing your sister, as well, so that will be- I'm not sure, I haven't [laughs] talked to her yet, but.

RS: Well, she's a talker, she'll [laughs].

AE: Oh, that's great, that's very good. Talkers are what we like. I am not a talker, so.

RS: You'll have something to say. **[45:55]** [RS and AE leave office, sound trails off and records the empty room.]

END OF INTERVIEW