



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK  
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

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**Interview with John T. Overbeck**

**Interview Date:** November 2, 2003  
**Interviewer:** Brendan Danaher  
**Transcriber:** Cynthia Skelton

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

[Initial conversation is related to setting up tape recorder.]

**DANAHER:** This is Brendan Danaher, and I'm interviewing John Overbeck for the Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project, and it's Sunday, November 2, 2003, and we're meeting at Mr. Overbeck's house at 604 A Street SE.

**OVERBECK:** Yes, that's correct.

**DANAHER:** Great. Mr. Overbeck, as we were testing out the microphone, was just talking a little bit about, who was that? Your grandfather?

**OVERBECK:** My great-grandfather. It all came up to try to figure out how Ruth Ann Overbeck and I are actually related. As I said, she thought that, although unfortunately she never got to it, but she thought that my great-grandfather was her great-great grandfather, because her great-great grandfather came over from Baltimore. What I was going to say, actually, it's caused a great mystery for me. I was just saying that my great-grandfather was a pacifist and had escaped from Prussia with a price on his head, so when the Civil War broke out he was a very fervent pacifist, so it must have been very difficult for him, and he ended up paying someone \$350 to fight the war for him.

**DANAHER:** The Civil War?

**OVERBECK:** The Civil War. And, I think there might have been a rift in the family between maybe that, and—because I have no records of any other Overbecks. Now, Ruth Ann's family, they came over by ship and landed in Baltimore, but they went on to Texas. But on her side, she had this fantastic history of some of her relatives were in different prisons during the Civil War, but in my family, you know, well, I guess, of course, because of my great-grandfather, there was no Civil War. And I made the horrible mistake of (laughing), when I went to Charleston, bringing up this story, because you know they call it the War Between the States (laughing), and there was dead silence when I said my great-grandfather had—but, I never would have been in any, couldn't be in any Charleston society. (laughing)

**DANAHER:** So, your—he landed in Baltimore, and then did your family stay in Baltimore?

**OVERBECK:** Yes, and then my family stayed in Baltimore, but evidently Ruth Ann... In Baltimore I had no knowledge of any other Overbecks, particularly in Texas.

**DANAHER:** So when did your family move to Washington?

**OVERBECK:** Well, that was just me. I came here in 1957, and I had been in the Army. I had been stationed in Germany, and I was in the army of the occupation. I worked for—it was very interesting. I lived in Munich, and I worked for a group of spies. I was a cryptographer.

**DANAHER:** Really?

**OVERBECK:** So, I came here. I went back home to Baltimore, and someone, a friend, said that he had heard of an opening at the Library of Congress, so I came over and I got a job in music and I was trying to recollect this. Course, I lived in Baltimore and I didn't want to commute, but in the time—I was hired very quickly and I think—so I came over, I think the place is still there. I stayed for a few nights. I stayed—it was near Union Station. The Carroll Arms? Do you know that? It's a red brick building, like an inn.

**DANAHER:** Do you know what street it's on?

**OVERBECK:** What's the street the Supreme Court is?

**DANAHER:** Oh, Second, on the back side.

**OVERBECK:** Yes, Second. And at that time, the Methodist [unclear] Building. It was right down from the Methodist Building. I think the building is still there; I don't know what it is. I took a room there for a few nights, and I went to Barbara Held whose office was in the 300 block of Pennsylvania Avenue [SE], across from the National Capital Bank. She told me about a basement apartment on C Street SE. That would be the 100 block. It's now where the Madison building is. She told me it was owned by a judge, a judge's wife, who was [garbled]. And I thought, oh this is a very good sign if she's a judge's wife, it must not be just sort of a hobby with her. (laughing) I was wrong there. So I got an apartment, a basement apartment in one of those large houses. I think it was \$75 a month, which seemed very high to me (laughs) at that time. And so I moved to the Hill right away. I was here.

**DANAHER:** And that was 1957?

**OVERBECK:** Yes. And I was discussing this with someone the other day. Of course, I still didn't have much of an idea of the Hill as a community. In those days, I thought more of it as people have like a rooming house and that sort of thing. Particularly, coming from Baltimore—and I was reminiscing too—I think that when my family used to drive over to Baltimore, on East Capitol Street, you'd see a lot of signs for rooms for rent and that sort of thing. Has anyone else mentioned that?

**DANAHER:** Not that I've—no, but you know I haven't read a lot of...

**OVERBECK:** Oh, and another thing too. Now, at the library there was a network. They immediately told me you should use the National Capital Bank because, and this was 1957, you can have your paycheck directly deposited. Although I think that was way before the days of the electronic. I think they had some sort of arrangement with the National Capital Bank. Course then, I still love the National Capital Bank.

**DANAHER:** Where was that? Where is that located?

**OVERBECK:** Well, it's the same where it is now, except that it was a funny old Victorian building, and they never dusted the Venetian blinds (laughing), and it had a great deal of character.

**DANAHER:** And where is it now?

**OVERBECK:** It's still in the same...

**DANAHER:** What's the address? Do you know?

**OVERBECK:** like 3...

**DANAHER:** Vaguely... like on Pennsylvania?

**OVERBECK:** Yeah, on Pennsylvania.

**DANAHER:** You mentioned Barbara Held. Was she a realtor? Who was she?

**OVERBECK:** Oh yes. She was one of the leading lights—I'll have to look that up for you. I have actually an article on this house. Barbara Held restored this house along with the—oh, isn't that funny? You're of a different generation, but Barbara Held was the realtor when I—in fact, Barbara's still alive. She's a remarkable person. She was behind the restoration movement. She and her partner at that time, Harry Bravman [sp?] restored this house. I'll try to find it before our next meeting. I have an article, I think from the *Post*. It says 'Restoration Marches Up Capitol Hill.' And this house—oh I have another funny story about this house. Well, maybe I should talk from the beginning. This house was built in 1888 for \$3600. Now the information I got—another interesting bit, that on this lot there had been a frame house that was moved. And the frame house had, have you ever heard of a real estate company called Shannon and Luchs?

**DANAHER:** (agreeing) um-huh.

**OVERBECK:** Well, this frame house was in the Luchs family, and I called the Luchs when I found this out, and I think I talked to Kenneth Luchs, and he was quite nice, and he said that yes, actually he was glad for this information. He said, you know, that his grandparents, I guess, or his parents, I guess by that time was grandparent. He was only vaguely familiar that they had this particular... So, this house was

built by a John Franklin, who was a sail maker at the Navy Yard. And, as I said, for \$3600. Now, just a little over a year ago, someone called me from Washington State, who said that he had the sea chest of this Franklin who built this house. He thought perhaps I was a descendant. He came and visited me. There again, if that's of any interest or I should turn over all these documents on the person who built this house to Ruth Ann's—whatever she established in there.

**DANAHER:** It might be interesting. We'll check with them and see.

**OVERBECK:** I was hoping that—now, he was looking for a descendant. I was hoping, I thought it would be actually nice to have this chest stay with the house, but then of course I realized that of course, that's not the answer, because you know something like that is not going to stay with the house forever. But the interesting thing was, the sail maker died—he lived here for maybe eight or nine years and then he died, but his family stayed on here for quite some time. And the first person who bought this house after Barbara Held restored it was Sissy Paterson's daughter Felicia. Sissy Paterson owned the *Times Herald*. And she had that magnificent house on Dupont Circle, that big white marble house that's now a women's club.

**DANAHER:** Oh, sure.

**OVERBECK:** So, her daughter lived here after the house was restored, and her husband was a well-known landscape architect, John Magruder. In fact, you see the bamboo out front? He loved bamboo, and he prided himself on the bamboo that he planted here. (Laughs) I love it; some people don't... (laughing) You have to keep after it, that's the only problem. In fact, when I bought the house I didn't know I had two gas lamps outside. Thought it was nothing but the bamboo. (laughs)

**DANAHER:** And did you buy from Sissy Paterson and Mr. Magruder?

**OVERBECK:** Oh no. Then, after—oh, there was a funny story about—Felicia, her father was a Polish count, and she had been kidnapped, actually. Her mother broke up with him and he tried to kidnap her and keep her in Poland. One funny story, I think. Of course in those days the Hill wasn't considered at all fashionable, and the story that I heard was that this man about town came here to visit Felicia, and she did have a maid, and he came in the living room, and the maid said that when Felicia appeared he said something to the effect, "Didn't your mother leave you anything at all?" (Laughing) Which implied that you had to live in this horrible neighborhood. (laughs) No, I bought it from a Mary Austin, who came here during the Roosevelt administration. She was part of the Roosevelt brain trust, and she worked on Social Security.

**DANAHER:** When did you move to the house?

**OVERBECK:** It was 1968.

**DANAHER:** So where did you live between '57 and '68? Were you always on the Hill?

**OVERBECK:** Yes. I had two basement apartments. The first was on C Street, and remember I mentioned about the judge's wife. Well, it turned out that she was a real slum landlord, and there was a very bad rainstorm, and this was the basement, and the rain was coming through my ceiling. I still don't understand that. I broke my lease and went to—and of course then she sued, she brought proceedings against me and sued me for, I think, two months (laughing) rent.

**DANAHER:** Did you have to pay?

**OVERBECK:** Yes, well, I settled for half, I think. My point was that it was unlivable. If every time it rained it was going to... (laughs). So, now I've lost my train of thought.

**DANAHER:** What do you remember about the Hill living in this area in the late 50's, early 60's?

**OVERBECK:** Well, as I said, at first it didn't really strike me as a community. One thing that I think—there was a wonderful Magruder's off of where I was renting, from those basement apartments, and I still don't understand why today we don't have a store like that. I don't know why Magruder's has moved...

**DANAHER:** And that was a grocery?

**OVERBECK:** Yes. Then I moved to a basement apartment on Carroll Street. And that was just such a—there I got really a community spirit. I mean, it was just a lovely—I still don't think there's a block on the Hill that's like that today. That Republican Club was at one end. And then I started meeting a lot of the neighbors, like the McCains. The McCains were the parents of the present senator, John McCain. They lived at the corner house on C Street, where now that Republican Club, it's part of the Republican Club. My family knew the people across the street. That was a very nice couple, the Betts. He was a general, and Mrs. Betts was a—well, Mrs. Betts is buried at Monticello. She's a great-great granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson. [ed: the following people named Betts are listed as buried at Monticello: Betts, Elizabeth McIntire Randolph (1893-1966); Betts, Elizabeth Hill (d. November 26, 1994); Betts, Thomas Jeffries (1894-1977).] It was such a joy eating in that house, because she inherited two pieces from Jefferson. One, the main one, was the dining room table. That was like a Castro convertible. It had console ends, it went from something like—you could serve two people to opening it up to a banquet size.

**DANAHER:** And this was Thomas Jefferson's table?

**OVERBECK:** Yeah. And she also had inherited a pair of silver candlesticks. Now, the dining room table she knew was made at Monticello. I think one of his slaves was a very good cabinet maker. I think it was his design. And then I remember, she got so mad because she got a call from Mrs. Kennedy, who said she thought the table should go to the White House, and Mrs. Betts says, “No, it doesn’t have any connection to do with the White House,” she said. “First of all it’s going to my daughter, and then I hope my daughter gives it back to Monticello.” But she was indignant. Well, that was when Mrs. Kennedy was trying to get all the antiques for the White House.

**DANAHER:** What else do you remember about the 60s and Capitol Hill? Did you shop anywhere in particular besides Magruder’s? Or where there places you enjoyed hanging out?

**OVERBECK:** Well, I’ve always loved Mr. Henry’s (laughs). Yes, cause, actually that started about the time, ’68. That had been the Hillbilly Bar, and it was funny if you’d go there during the transformation because, rather, the transition, because you’d still get the old crowd, and the new crowd. Of course, I love this block. Now for me this block is like Carroll Street. But I moved here and it still wasn’t—like for example, the house across the street, the corner house—that was a grocery store. And shortly after I moved in, I heard all these popping noises, and I ran outside. The owner was actually firing down the street at someone—he was just firing at will (laughing) down the street, just firing at will at someone who had tried to rob him (laughing). I mean, he was more of a danger than...

**DANAHER:** That’s pretty amazing. So, 1968, that was certainly an eventful year in Washington. What do you remember about the riot?

**OVERBECK:** Oh yes, the riots. I had gone to a performance of the *Great White Hope*, with Jane Alexander and what’s the wonderful actor, James Earl Jones, and when we went out for a cigarette at intermission, there seemed to be some rumbling, and that was when the—and afterwards they announced the assassination of Martin Luther King.

**DANAHER:** And what theater were you at that point?

**OVERBECK:** Arena Stage.

**DANAHER:** And that’s when Arena was—was it on the waterfront at that point or was it up on 14<sup>th</sup> Street?

**OVERBECK:** It was on the waterfront. Cause it had been when it was the Brewery, too, [unclear] but, it was down in the Southwest. (Lights a cigarette) So you asked about the other place. I had bought—I suppose this has to come out too, because the difference in prices at the time... The house I mentioned on Ninth Street, I had paid \$13,500 for, and I was the second person on that block to come in and do

restoration. I was very touched because the neighbors, who were predominantly black, helped us out a great deal. They said something about that we should tie something black on the door so that we wouldn't be a random violence or anything like that. It was really quite touching. It was scary, but it was nothing, and of course we were worried about fires being set and all that. But also, I believe I was making negotiations for this house at the time. So, I was trying to think, there was something about—I started arguing about—this sounds ridiculous, but at that time the prevailing interest rate was 6%, but I couldn't get 6%, and I made a big fuss about that, so the owner took the mortgage back and gave it to me for 6%.

**DANAHER:** You drove a hard bargain.

**OVERBECK:** (laughs) Now, I thought of something else about this house. When I mentioned I paid \$13,500 for this house. Do you remember Libby Sangster? She had the Antiques on the Hill.

**DANAHER:** This is the store across from Eastern Market?

**OVERBECK:** Yes.

**DANAHER:** Which was on North Carolina and Seventh, on the corner there?

**OVERBECK:** Right. When she came over she said, "Oh, I love this house," she said. "But it was too expensive," she said. "They wanted \$13,500 for it." (laughs)

**DANAHER:** And she came over right after you moved in?

**OVERBECK:** Not immediately, but soon after. So, no, she said that was just too much. (laughs)

**DANAHER:** Now, you said you worked at Library of Congress in the music section. Did you always work in that section? Did you move around in the library?

**OVERBECK:** Well, I started out cataloguing in the copyright division. And then there was an opening in the descriptive cataloguing, and I got that, which is much more interesting work. In fact, I spent most—I was very lucky—I worked mostly on manuscripts and rare—for example, every year Stravinsky would give us a manuscript. Well, actually, it was a tax write-off. But you know you get these beautiful Stravinsky manuscripts to catalogue. And I worked on collections. No, it was an ideal job. Unfortunately, though, when the unions got in they said all this work had to be shared, so that sort of burst the bubble (laughs).

**DANAHER:** So, how long did you work at Library of Congress?

**OVERBECK:** Let's see, I was two years in the army and about 28 years.



**DANAHER:** And was that your whole working career, or did you work some place afterwards?

**OVERBECK:** No. No, I got full retirement, but I took it at 55. I'm now 72. I would have stayed on except that in '83 I had cancer of the colon, and so there's 20 years, but I was still feeling the effects of that, and it was very difficult.

**DANAHER:** You spent a long time at the Library of Congress. What do you remember about that? What did you enjoy about the job?

**OVERBECK:** I enjoyed really just working, just the wonderful material you were, at least I was, working with. I was trying to think... Oh, so I told you the story about Libby and the price. Has much of this come up, the real estate boom, and the difference in prices? Cause I realize now I was here at the time where all this was still going on. I mean, its amazing that people were—a house like this was sold for \$13,500. (laughs).

**DANAHER:** Why don't you talk about that a little bit?

**OVERBECK:** I bought this house restored. She was asking \$65,000, which everyone, well, all my friends were shocked. They said, "Oh, you could get something in Georgetown." But she had put in an elevator, so she discounted the price of the elevator, so I think that was like \$9,000 was taken off for the elevator, which I need, ironically, which I depend on myself now.

**DANAHER:** I'm just a little confused. I thought you bought this house for—you mentioned \$13,000?

**OVERBECK:** Oh, that was the house I had previous to that. That, I restored that. I paid \$13,000.

**DANAHER:** And that's the one on Carroll Street, on Ninth and Carroll?

**OVERBECK:** No, on Ninth, in the 500 block of Ninth.

**DANAHER:** And the Carroll Street was a rental. Okay, sorry about that. So then you moved from Ninth and E SE, to this house. And that was in 1968?

**OVERBECK:** Yes.

**DANAHER:** And who were your neighbors in 1968 around here? When you first moved in, or in those early years?

**OVERBECK:** Well, next door on this side was the Fox family. He was a guard at the Folger, and he did a wonderful job. All his children were just wonderful. Oh, and by the way, did you know Jerrene Truett? She wasn't there then. She was a real estate agent. She died a few weeks ago. I thought you might have

known her. She was with Pardoe. Let's see, when I moved, I'm trying to think—on this side... That had always been one of these houses that has been rented out. I think when I moved in, he was with the State Department, so they rented it. It was turned into a duplex. So I just knew the renters.

**DANAHER:** What kind of people rented? Were they young or old? Were they families or Capitol Hill interns?

**OVERBECK:** They were young. For a long time there was a very nice—for some reason a lot of academic—the family that—this is going back a long time ago. I think he taught at the University of Maryland. Awful nice family. And, I'm trying to think. In those days... Oh, I wish I could find this out. When I first moved here someone told me that someone in this block had done a history of all in this block. That would be a gold mine today, if it could ever be unearthed (laughs) because the person who had seen this research had said, "Oh yes, and your house had been owned by a Polish countess." Well, you know, I told you that story that she was born...

**DANAHER:** Hold on just a second, I'm going to flip this tape.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

**DANAHER:** So, who else was living around here at that point?

**OVERBECK:** Audrey Jones. There are several people who have been here longer than me, I think, and some I'm still very good friends with, like Tina Anderson. I'm very good friends of hers, and next time I see her I'll have to ask her what, when she... And Audrey Jones across the street has been here longer. Let me think. What I find so remarkable as I get older, particularly this block, it's just so wonderful. There's such a wonderful network of us that I don't know what I'd ever do if I—I just think it's ideal. It also has the advantage of the younger people coming in are so nice. Friendly and nice. So I like—the diversity is wonderful, I think.

**DANAHER:** You said there's a network. Were you involved with community groups?

**OVERBECK:** No, I think it's just sort of that we're all growing old together.

**DANAHER:** Did you ever go to church in the area?

**OVERBECK:** I was very active with St. Mark's for a while, when I first came here. In fact, in those days St. Mark's had, during Lent, there was a program in the church of presenting a play, and you know you'd go to the different churches. Are you familiar with St. Mark's?

**DANAHER:** A little.

**OVERBECK:** Bill Baxter was the pastor, and he was quite an activist.

**DANAHER:** And when was that? Do you remember?

**OVERBECK:** Let's see, that must have been when I was living in those basement apartments, so that was quite early. This was during Lent. We'd go around to the different churches. Oh, and I went because I was the organist and I played the music, I forget what the format was, but there was some short service and then this play would be presented. And then Harry MacPherson was in that group. He was in the Johnson administration. He wrote some of the plays. I should have made that clear to you. Usually these were plays that were written by members of the congregation. Then after the performance we'd all get drunk (raucous laughter). Oh, I remember now, because I was so horrified. When it was my turn that they came to my basement apartment. I mean, I was really cleared out, I mean, every bottle (laughter). This was really a very wild church group. (more laughter)

**DANAHER:** So, you liked hanging out at Mr. Henry's. What other neighborhood spots?

**OVERBECK:** In those days...

**DANAHER:** Just anytime over your tenure here.

**OVERBECK:** Well, when I was on Ninth Street right around the corner from me there was this bar called Johnny's that was fascinating because it was one of these—it was like what a karaoke bar would be today. There'd be talent that would get up and sing. That would be at Eighth... Let's see, I think that's a Mexican restaurant now. Eighth and E...

**DANAHER:** Down by Barracks Row.

**OVERBECK:** (lights a cigarette) Oh yeah, there used to be a lot of those places. There were some greasy spoons there I liked—Millie's.

**DANAHER:** And that was a diner?

**OVERBECK:** It was a—they said it was a restaurant (skeptical laughter)

**DANAHER:** Where else did you like to eat along...?

**OVERBECK:** I guess Sherrill's, too.

**DANAHER:** Where was Sherrill's?

**OVERBECK:** You know, I've lost track of all those places, but I thought that was still there. I guess it's not. I'd have to check for you.

**DANAHER:** Is that on the Hill or downtown?

**OVERBECK:** No, that's on Pennsylvania, about where—a few doors from the Trover's.

**DANAHER:** You know, that just moved out. That's the place that had the really big painting behind the dining room there, behind the diner counter there?

**OVERBECK:** Oh, yes. It's funny. It all sort of becomes—some certain things flash back. I hope I'm not, I know I'm not making any sense cause I keep... (lost in laughter) from one thing to another. It's very difficult cause I can't really stay too focused, and I can't immediately now recall some of these places, but I'm sure some things are coming to mind.

**DANAHER:** Sounds like you did a lot of music—things around music. You were an organist, and you liked to sing occasionally at Johnny's. What else did you do with music?

**OVERBECK:** Oh, I didn't sing! I just listened. (laughs) I can't sing. Well, I'm a collector. I collect prints, and I'm trying to think what else. I became quite interested in the restoration side, although, as I said, with this, it's just been really maintaining it. Finally ending it up the way I like it. This house has been on the tour twice, while I was still—the year after I moved in. And then I was asked to do it—I said I'd never do it. Oh, this is interesting. I said I'd never do it, and then it turned out that they—I was called at the last minute in '99, and I said, "Oh, I think that would be wonderful." Because, you know, I had it on 30 years ago. So I thought, historically, that would make a nice point. But I don't think anyone—I didn't know what a big business it had become. So I don't think anyone got that point (chuckles) back in '99, that this was the house where the same person had lived for 30 years.

**DANAHER:** And who runs those tours?

**OVERBECK:** That's the Capitol Hill Restoration Society. And, as I say, I didn't know it had become big business. They turn people away. They sold 2,000 tickets, I think, and then that was it.

**DANAHER:** So you had 2,000 people come through your house?

**OVERBECK:** It seemed like it. (laughter) It really was horrible. I noticed a great difference then, because 30 years ago, it was more of a community or network. I mean, I knew all the other people whose houses were on this. This time, I only knew one couple who went back. So, I don't know if that's significant, but in a sense, that before, whereas I say, it was more like a family affair and it wasn't this big business. As I

say now, you get 2,000 people... I heard that they were lined up to Sixth Street, just waiting to get in. Do you go on those?

DANAHER: I've been once.

OVERBECK: You think that's enough? (laughs)

DANAHER: It was pretty interesting. So how do you think that the Hill's changed over the last 40 years? Is there anything in particular you think about?

OVERBECK: I had to think about that when I thought I'd be asked. Well, I suppose, this one I've got to take more time with. As I said, the problem is I can't really—I don't know—I can't really make any assessment of who's moving here now. The prices seem so high I have no idea what's going on (laughs). And, it's a shame to base things on that, but, maybe next time—I really have to think about that because I don't want to just give some...

DANAHER: Are there any businesses you remember having been here the whole time? The long-standing businesses? Any particular businesses you miss that have disappeared?

OVERBECK: Well, I've used the same plumber, for example, Bauer's. And National Capital Bank. There, the Diddens are very community-minded. Now, you know, that their parents and grandparents, and I guess great grandparents, grew up here but of course now all the young Diddens moved to the suburbs.

DANAHER: Who are the Diddens?

OVERBECK: They're the owners of National Capital Bank. I think that's very unusual that you have a bank here that's been controlled by one family. So actually, I have a question. This is actually a part of Ruth Ann's—the money she left for the project?

DANAHER: I know that that may be some of it. I'm sure that they are getting grants from a variety of locations. So we go around and they've trained an increasing number of people to go around and just talk to folks and take their oral history. And focusing on Capitol Hill, but talking about professions and the neighborhood, and the history of the neighborhood, just pretty much anything that people want to focus on. So is there anything else that... You want to talk anymore about the house, or the previous owner of the house, or—anything else?

OVERBECK: I think I'll save it for next time.

DANAHER: Well, then, in that case, I guess we will hit the stop button. I just want to say thank you for taking your time.

OVERBECK: Well, thank you.

DANAHER: I do appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW