

# Women Who Are Architects

Date of Interview: July 8, 2020

**Sasser, Sara Elizabeth (Lisa), AIA** ~ Oral History

## Interview

Sarah K Filkins

Sasser, Sara Elizabeth (Lisa) Interview by Sarah K. Filkins. *Women Who Are Architects*. Architect's home office of Quid Tum Historic Structures Consulting in Rock Hall, MD. Date of the interview: July 8, 2020

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Sara Elizabeth (Lisa) Sasser, AIA Interview, July 8, 2020

## Background

**Interviewer:** Sarah K Filkins

**Interviewee:** Sara Elizabeth (Lisa) Sasser

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Rock Hall, MD ██████████

Year of Birth: 1954

**Date of Interview:** July 8, 2020

**Place:** Offices of Quid Tum Historic Structures Consulting

Other People Present: None

Background Noise: Home Office in Small Town Setting

**Equipment Used:** TASCAM DR-100MKII Linear PCM Recorder  
audio-technica AT899 Subminiature Omnidirectional Condenser Lavalier  
Microphones

**Recording Medium Used:** Digital 24-Bit/96 kHz Recording Resolution WAV Files

**Transcriber:** Sarah K Filkins

**Key Words:** Quid Tum, architecture, licensed professional architect, woman architect, documenting, historic preservation, National Park Service, historic structures report, National Trust for Historic Preservation, gender equity, conservation, conservators, restoration, stabilize, Association for Preservation Technology, architectural registration exam, cultural resources Preservation Trades Training Program, tradesperson, hands-on, Timber Framers Guild, Denver Service Center, Preservation Trades Network, Pacific Northwest Preservation Field School, Civilian Conservation Corps, houserow, Williamsport Preservation Training Center, Jim Askins, carpentry, joinery, masonry.

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This is Sarah Filkins Interviewer speaking with Lisa Sasser, AIA on Wednesday, July 8, [2020] at the home office of Quid Tum Historic Structures Consulting in Rock Hall, Maryland

Lisa Sasser: That's correct.

SF: Good Afternoon

LS: Good afternoon

SF: Quid Tum. What a wonderful name.

LS: Well it's from the emblem of Leon Battista Alberti. In some translations it means "What Next?"

SF: Thank you for agreeing to share your story with us as part of the Library of Congress, American Folklife Center, Occupation Folklife Project, funded by an Archie Green Fellowship.

LS: I'm so pleased to talk with you today.

SF: Thank you, it's great to be here.

LS: So let's start. Please tell us your full name and your year of birth.

LS: Sara Elizabeth Sasser although I go by Lisa and I was born in 1954.

SF: That's for the archives, for their reference. Okay, so please describe your current job and responsibilities.

LS: Well I'm semi-retired but I work with the National Park Service [NPS] Learning and Development Program and the National Park Service Vanishing Treasures Program doing preservation and cultural resources training.

SF: So what sorts of training are you doing? And is this all over the country?

LS: Yes, I work with a team of instructors and the main training that we offer in a normal year would be four or five times we offer a week long or three day long historic preservation field-based historic preservation workshop ["Guiding Principles for Field-Based Historic Preservation" offered by NPS Vanishing Treasures Program], which is offered to National Park Service employees and also employees of other agencies, private sector, which emphasizes giving people who work primarily in the field an opportunity to develop an understanding of

preservation philosophy and principles and guidelines that they can apply to the work they do in the field.

SF: Wow, I can think of no better person to be teaching that after your background and all of your training and experience. So let's look back to growing up in Texas, when did you first become aware of architecture or the built environment?

LS: Well my mother was a faculty member at Texas Tech University in what was initially the College of Art and Architecture or the School of Art and Architecture and became the College of Art and Architecture. She taught architectural history classes, first year design, watercolor, that sort of thing, and I more or less grew up in the architecture school. And the fifth year thesis students would babysit me and that kind of thing so I never didn't know about architecture.

SF: What was it that you loved about architecture?

LS: Well initially, I really liked the models. I thought those were cool. And I wanted to do them and I wanted to play with them.

SF: So then did you take drafting in high school or anything that you...did you know that you wanted to be an architect?

LS: Oh, yeah, definitely. I mean I was drawing buildings by the time I was in the second grade and I wanted to take drafting in high school but in those days they wouldn't let women take it. So I finally got a special dispensation to take drafting as a senior. And that was back in the days when we were still using ruling pins and that kind of thing so it was fun and interesting and I really enjoyed it.

SF: Then what about school for college, did you always know you were going to go to Texas Tech?

LS: I did, yeah.

SF: That was home?

LS: Yeah, that was home.

SF: So you must have studied—had some classes under your Mom, I guess.

LS: I did and it was always the great embarrassment of seeing pictures of me as a six year old with scuffed up knees looking sullen on the steps of some great architectural monument somewhere. (laughs)

SF: So this was part of the slides she was showing the class where she pointed out that you were the sullen six year old?

LS: Yeah, she'd say, "Go be a scale figure." (laughs)

SF: What kind of program did they have at Texas Tech? Was that a five year...

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LS: Yeah, that was a five year Bachelor of Architecture program in the days when that was widely considered to be the terminal degree in architecture and before the advent of the four year and two year masters programs. It sort of became the standard. I always regretted that I didn't have a masters degree but it worked out.

SF: When you were in architecture school were you focusing at that point on historic preservation or what were your goals when you graduated from the five year program?

LS: Well, it's funny. I mean I was focused on design when I started the program but I think it was the summer of my sophomore year I got a job working at the [National] Ranching Heritage Center which was a division of the Texas Tech University Museum and it was being developed as a thirteen acre site on which buildings and structures from all periods and areas related to Texas ranching history would be reconstructed and interpreted so that job got me focused on preservation. Once I got involved in working with historic structures I never really looked back. And coincidentally about the time that I was really getting into the idea of preservation, Texas Tech started offering a certificate program in historic preservation that you could get as an add-on the five year degree. And I think, I'm not sure, I may have been the first person that graduated from Texas Tech with the certificate in preservation.

SF: Well, that's exciting. Were there other women in your program?

LS: Not many. I think out of maybe six-hundred people in the school of architecture—I think there were maybe seven or eight women in the starting class and probably only two or three that graduated when I did. So, there was a lot of attrition.

SF: And did you find that environment supportive and generally did you find it was supportive of women in architecture?

LS: Not particularly. But I never expected it to be so I never felt that I was being deprived of anything. I just—it never occurred to me that it would be supportive so I didn't much mind.

SF: Did you have any mentors or know any women who were architects?

LS: I don't think I knew any women architects but I had some wonderful mentors—none of them women actually. But Lee Graves who was the construction foreman at the Ranching Heritage Center was a old Texas rancher and one of those people that was what they used to call “a really good mechanic,” meaning that he could build anything or make anything work pretty much with duct tape and bailing wire. And he was one of these incredibly gifted storytellers that could tell these stories that made these historic buildings just come alive. And it was Lee that taught me that preservation was as much about people as it was about buildings. And that the process of preserving the buildings was to keep alive the memories of the people who built them and their skills and what they knew and how they lived.

SF: Very powerful mentor, wow!

LS: Yes, and then later on when I went through the National Park Service Preservation Trades Training Program at Williamsport, the founder of that program, Jim Askins, was a wonderful mentor. He was one of those people that everybody was kind of terrified of because he was very gruff and outwardly difficult to get along with but he really had a big heart and, you know, you really had to prove yourself with him. But it was worth every bit of it.

SF: And you were the first woman in that program weren't you?

LS: Yes, yes I was.

SF: So you graduated from architecture school—then what were you thinking? Where did you want to go? Who did you want to work for?

LS: Well, I knew I wanted to work in preservation and what I wanted more than anything in the world was to work for the National Park Service [NPS] in Santa Fe, New Mexico because my thesis project

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was the restoration of the Southwest houserow at Tesque Pueblo in northern New Mexico.

SF: Could you explain what a houserow is too?

LS: Well, the pueblo was built around a square and it had the church on one side and then on three sides it had these blocks of connected buildings so one of them had fallen into disrepair and the pueblo had some funding to work on it and I volunteered basically to do that and the Tribal Council agreed to work with me and give me information leading to the development of a sort of proto-historic structures report back when they really were still not terribly well defined and then a plan for the restoration of it.

SF: So that was your thesis project?

LS: That was my thesis project so I really, really wanted to get on with the Park Service in Santa Fe but they didn't have any jobs open so I ended up in Denver working for the US Fish and Wildlife Service designing fish hatcheries—which was kind of fun but eventually a position opened up with the National Park Service at the Denver Service Center which was the centralized design and construction office for NPS, as you know.

SF: Well, could you explain a little bit about how that was set up in terms of having all of the architects and engineers and everybody in one location.

LS: Yeah, they had I guess had consolidated a couple of offices around the country a few years before the office in Denver opened up and they wanted to put everyone together but they had regional teams and I was on the North Atlantic-Mid Atlantic Team as that was constituted at the time and it had architects, historians, archaeologists, planners, engineers, various other professionals that were deployed to work on projects in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic.

SF: So what were some of the projects that you worked on?

LS: Well, it was kind of ironic at the time. I worked a lot on the initial design for the repair and rehabilitation of Boott Mill in Lowell, Massachusetts where I ultimately ended up working in the Park Service Cultural Resources Branch there. And of course I always joked if I had known I was going to end up working there, I wouldn't have put the bathrooms so far away from the office. (laughs)

SK: Because that's where you were when you actually retired from the Park Service?

LS: Yeah.

SF: So full circle.

LS: It was definitely full circle but I worked on projects like Martin Van Buren's home in Kinderhook, New York; Eleanor Roosevelt's Val-Kill; projects at Delaware Water Gap [National Recreation Area]; Statue of Liberty Ellis Island; and a number of other projects so it was really varied and interesting.

SF: So when you say worked on, what do you mean? What did that encompass?

LS: Oh, everything from working on portions of Historic Structures Reports to doing conditions assessment and documentation, preliminary planning, working with A & E [Architecture and Engineering] firms on project documents—that kind of thing.

SF: So you would go out in the field, assess the situation and measure or whatever and then go back to the office in Denver and prepare drawings or reports?

LS: Yes

SF: What was your favorite part of that kind of work?

LS: Getting out in the field. Always. Loved being out in the field.

SF: And then you had this incredible opportunity I guess to get additional training. Could you talk about your experiences at the center in Williamsport [MD]?

LS: Well, there were a couple of people I knew in Denver who had worked at or been through the National Park Service Historic Preservation Training Program in Williamsport and knew Jim Askins and told all these wild stories about all of this. And I got sent out there for two weeks of hands-on training doing masonry repointing and really enjoyed it and liked

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the whole idea of working with my hands because that's what I'd always been interested in. That's what I really wanted to do more than anything was work hands-on in the trades. So I just one day called up Jim Askins and said, "I want to go through the training program." And he said, "Oh, okay. When do you want to start?" And so he told me to plan on coming out there in a year to go through the training program. And it was funny because people I'd never even met in Denver were coming up to me in the hallways and said, "I hear you're going to go to the Williamsport Preservation Training Program. They'll NEVER tolerate a woman in that program. You won't last two weeks. Are you out of your mind?" So sure enough, I ended up going out there and managed to stick it out in the program.

SF: What kind of training program was it? What were you doing?

LS: The program was set up with a two to three year trades training program for people that had some to minimal experience in the building trades to develop hands-on techniques in traditional building trades—carpentry, joinery, masonry—and also an understanding of historic methods and materials; how to run projects; how to do that kind of thing. And at the time I was going through the program, they had a permanent standing crew who supervised the projects and who were sort of intended and designed to be trainers and mentors for the people that were going through the training program. And you could end up going pretty much anywhere in the country and working on projects for anywhere from a couple of weeks to a year or more. So you never really knew quite where you were going to be or what you were going to be doing and frequently you'd get called up to work on other projects if there was a need for that. I remember, not long after I got there, there was a hurricane that was threatening to come up the [Chesapeake] Bay and we all got put on a roofing project at Antietam Battlefield. And I hadn't been there very long and I did not like heights. So here I was up on the scaffolding and I wasn't real happy about it and I thought to myself, Ehhh if I can—if I can last til morning break but I'm going to get down off of



this scaffolding and I'm going to quit. I'm just not going to do this anymore. I can't stand it. And then I'd get down there and say, Ehhh, maybe I'll go til lunch. And then, eh, okay I think I can make it through the day. (laughs)

SF: Do you think that was a test?

LS: Oh, yeah. I mean in those days there were a lot of—there was a fair amount of what you could call hazing that went on. I mean you'd get your boots nailed to the floor and painted and things like that and there was a fair amount of stuff that went on.

SF: Do you think because you were a woman specifically or they did that to everyone?

LS: They did that to everybody and it was one of those kind of places where if they didn't abuse you constantly it meant they really didn't like you.

SF: Well this is a very different—could you explain how it's different from the role of an architect typically. You know, what you were doing. You were not just going out in the field to supervise projects, you were...

LS: I was hands-on all day long and I was up on the roof or I was down in the cellar or I was in the shop fabricating window sash and milling lumber and things like that. And I remember one time in particular, there was this old guy, who I guess he was Old Rhoe Sheets. I guess he was probably close to eighty by the time I was there. And Askins had worked with him when he was a young man and he was sort of there to be the drill sergeant, you know, to sort of—but anyway, I got put to work with the old man one time building these doors for a root cellar at Valley Forge and I got probably about to the end of the day and we'd been milling this lumber sized to make these doors and I realized the old man had milled everything half an inch too narrow,

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just to trip me up. So I was like, Oh man! So anyway, everybody left and I took all of the lumber that had gotten milled wrong, buried it back in the lumber room and I was there all night long. And I re-milled everything and I had the doors finished and lying out on sawhorses when the crew came in the next morning. The old man came in and he saw what I'd done and he went charging upstairs to Askins' office, closed the door, and I could hear him hollering all the way down in the shop. And Askins came down and he said, "Sasser, what did you do to that old man? I ain't never seen him worked up like that before. What did you do to him?" And I said, "Jim, I didn't do nothing." He was like, "Why didn't you come to me and tell me you were having problems with the old man?" And I said, "Jim, what would you have thought if I would have come and said, 'I can't work with that old man. He's being mean to me.'" And he said, "Get out of my office." (laughs)

SF: And how did the old man react?

LS: Oh, he stomped around and cussed and hollered and...but

SF: Well, he probably had a great deal of respect for you.

LS: Well, over time, you know, he'd start to show me little tips and things and it was.

SF: Well, that's respect.

LS: Hmm—a certain amount. (laughs)

SF: And how long was that program?

LS: I was in the actual program for two years and then I stayed on—on the staff at HPTC as a, let's see, for a while I was a supervisory exhibit specialist. And I was running crews in the section. We had an "A" team and a "B" team and I ran the "B" team.

SF: What does a supervisory exhibit specialist do?

LS: It's basically just a historic carpenter or tradesperson. Of course, I was just sort of the hybrid architect/tradesperson, whatever, but I supervised projects and ran a crew and went out into the field.

SF: Well, during your training, what were the different skills that you learned, or different specialties?

LS: I made doors and window sash from scratch. I did a fair amount of, actually a lot of, masonry work. Of course I worked my way up from mixing mud for a whole team of masons, to actually doing repointing or laying brick or doing stone masonry, that kind of thing. And then I also did some projects that were more documentation or planning or design, that kind of thing; did part of a historic structures report on the west wing of the Robert E. Lee Mansion in Arlington National Cemetery; and overall several phases of contract and day-labor work there.

SF: Well, you must have felt really empowered as an architect to have gone through that kind of training program and understand not only from the perspective of an architect drawing and prescribing how something should look, to somebody in the field and actually being able to understand how it's made and how it should be made.

LS: It was very, very, very humbling because I would realize when I was actually doing masonry—I mean I had done probably hundreds of details of masonry practices and connections and joints and that kind of thing over the years, and it wasn't until I was actually doing it in three-dimensions in the field, in the actual materials that I realized how much I hadn't known about it.

SF: About the way that it really was built?

LS: Yeah, so it was extremely humbling and it was a reminder that you can never really know everything about something and it's a constant impetus to keep learning more and doing more and trying to get a deeper understanding of it.

SF: And you've done some writing about the relationship between architects and the tradesman—and how often that is not integrated—the tradesman's not involved in the project from the beginning

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and the architect not really understanding the best way to do it in the field. How do you—I guess that prompted some of your later pursuits?

LS: Yes, and Jim Askins was a really influential proponent of the importance of architects and tradespeople working together. And he in turn was influenced by people like Hugh Miller, that had been involved with Charles Peterson in the Park Service for years and years and years that really understood and appreciated the skills of the tradespeople and their importance in specifying and executing preservation work. And Jim was a tremendous proponent for that and used to talk about the Whitehill Report that was done in the late 1960s by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the National Park Service which advocated improving training programs for both architects and tradespeople in the historic preservation trades. And that's where I sort of got involved in that whole thing. And as organizations like the Preservation Trades Network developed, it became another way to sort of try to amplify this message and get more and more people invested in this approach which I think over time, there has been a difference and there is, I think, a greater awareness of how integral the role of the trades is in doing good preservation work.

SF: It's interesting that you had that kind of—that opportunity. How many people went through the program at Williamsport each year? And then that program is still continuing to operate?

LS: Yeah. The program itself started in 1977 and in the early years, I think there may have been seven or eight people complete the program in a year and I don't know how many trainees are in the program at present but they're constrained by space even though there is a huge demand for their services and the work they do and the training they produce. So there's actually a hope that in the next few years they'll expand the campus so they can have more than a hundred employees including trainees.

SF: So you lived there and then you just went out on jobs all over the country as you were needed.

LS: Yes, yeah. And part of it I was detailed for a year at Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area where I worked on stabilization at Everett Village which is a nineteenth century collection of railroad buildings, houses that sort of thing, that the park ultimately rehabilitated but would have otherwise been lost had they not been stabilized and also got to work some on the reconstruction of the Furnace Run Covered Bridge which was a great project.

SF: So at what point in this process did you decide to take your architectural registration exam?

LS: Oh gee, I started taking the exam I think it was when I was—it must have been around 79 or 79 that I started taking the exam—that I had my requisite length of the apprenticeship or whatever in. And of course, like a lot of people, I didn't pass everything on the first try. I passed what was in the written exam, I think, the first time around but it took me four or five times to get through the design exam. And I initially took the exam in Colorado but I got tired of the crowds and started taking it in Wyoming. And I remember one year when I took the design exam in Wyoming and I had this old Chevy truck and I was driving from Boulder where I lived

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up to Cheyenne where the exam was and the water pump blew on my truck. And I knew that I—the chances of my getting there were pretty much slim to none at that point. So I said, Well, you know, what am I going to do. So, I went and stood out on the highway, put my thumb out and this truck driver stopped and bless his heart, he took me right in to the city and dropped me off right on the steps of the state office building where the exam was being held and the proctor and a whole bunch of the people that were there for the exam were waiting outside and got to watch me step down out of this giant semi and the proctor just looked at me and said, “Well that's quite an entrance.” (laughs)

SF: Well, this was when you had to take your own drafting table and equipment and everything [to the exam], didn't you?

LS: I didn't have to take the drafting table but I had to take all of the other equipment.

SF: And then you went in to take a twelve hour exam to solve a design problem.

LS: Yes, and as it happened there was another guy from Boulder that was in the exam so he gave me a ride back to Boulder.

SF: Well, I've heard a lot—everybody has these very interesting stories about ice storms and taking the exam in parking garages that were unheated in the middle of winter but your—that's an amazing story. That's a good one. Never heard that one before.

SF: So you were working at Williamsport, then what was next?

LS: Well, Randy Biallas, who was at that time the Chief Historical Architect of the National Park Service was advertising for a “Deputy” and sort of pushed me to apply for the position which I did with some trepidation because I really didn’t know if I wanted to, you know, work in Washington and give up traveling with the crew and that kind of thing. But I did ultimately take the job. So but it was kind of funny—the guys on my crew came up to me and said, “Gee, Sasser, why do you want to go to Washington and work with all of those \*\*\*\* yahoos?” And I said, “Because I want to make them more like us.”

SF: Oh, good for you. What was that like? What a culture shock, I guess.

LS: It was a real culture shock but it had some really great aspects to it. One of which was that I got to do a lot of training if I could get funding, I could offer pretty much any training that I could dream up. And I got to do some cool stuff like go out to Mt. Hood, Oregon for a couple of summers and work on CCC [Civil Conservation Corp] buildings with the Forest Service and do training and hands-on stuff out there.

SF: What’s your favorite training to do?

LS: I think that the CCC log building workshops that we did in Oregon with the Forest Service were some of my favorite ones of all time and that also led somewhat indirectly to the development of the Pacific Northwest Preservation Field School because people like Don Peting at the University of Oregon and Henry Kunowski who was at that time in the State Historic Preservation Office and John Platz with the Forest Service wanted to develop this training on a broader basis and bring—turn it into really a fully fledged field school. And it’s still going on now after—I think the first one was in 1994 or something like that.

SF: So that’s something that from your position in Washington you were able to orchestrate and pull all of these people together to make happen.

LS: Well, I got pulled into it along with them and we all sort of fell into it at the same time and this great synergy happened with it. But those were really exciting times. It was a lot of fun.

SF: And people would come for from one to two weeks or would they come for a whole summer? And what would they be studying?

LS: People had that option and at that time we would have a project that might have various components—window work or log work or something like that and they would usually stay for a week, maybe two weeks. A few of them would stay for

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the entire duration.

SF: In Washington then what about—we always think of bureaucracy when we think of Washington. What was it like working within those sorts of—with that sort of culture? I guess you were seeing everything from a different perspective.

LS: Yeah, and it was interesting because there was this sort of cultural divide between the people in the field and in the parks and the people in Washington, where I think they didn't really always recognize fully what their counterparts did or the divide between the internal and external programs for example. I know there was tremendous professionalism and talent on both sides of the equation but they really didn't always have the means of communicating or understanding each other.

SF: So that was something you were able to facilitate?

LS: I hope so. I don't know how much of that I did and it became after a while—I wasn't allowed to do as much of the training and all of that kind of thing as I'd wanted and I was doing more data base management kinds of tasks which I was not as interested in so that was when I started looking to get out of Washington and when I was offered a position in what was in the cultural resources branch in Lowell, Massachusetts, I took that opportunity.

SF: What were your job responsibilities there?

LS: I was a project manager and ran a lot of A & E [Architecture and Engineering] projects, worked on historic structures reports, got to do some hands-on training—as much of that as I could justify and get away with.

SF: And was this just for the park at Lowell or was this for the whole region?

LS: The entire Northeast Region.

SF: What were some of those projects?

LS: I worked a lot on the stabilization of the south side of Ellis Island. That took, oh gee, probably three or four years of work on that.

SF: When you say stabilization, what...

LS: Those are the hospital buildings and wards on the southern half of the island that had never been restored and had been falling into ruin since the island was abandoned and needed tremendous amounts of work—lead abatement, asbestos abatement, all of those kinds of things.

SF: And what other kinds of work—when you say stabilize what are you referring to?

LS: Things like putting window ventilation screens in the windows, improving air flow through the buildings, getting the vegetation out of the roofs, doing some structural shoring where structural steel had been too damaged to continue to function, so, a lot of roof closures and structural augmentation.

SF: What's ever happened to those buildings, do you know?

LS: They are slowly, I think, being—they're definitely being maintained and I think there are some gradual steps toward rehabilitation.

SF: So you basically prevented them from deteriorating any more until something could happen?

LS: Yes, yes.

SF: What other projects did you work on in the Northeast?

LS: Oh gee, I worked on—I did some more work at Martin Van Buren National Historic Site which I had worked on years before when I was at the Denver Service Center and Johnstown Flood and various other projects.

SF: Well, at some point in there—because you referenced when you went to architecture school you were drawing with pencil on paper—and at some point in there did you have to learn Auto-Cad or drawing on [a] computer?

LS: I really never did because by the point in time at which it would have made sense for me to do it I was doing more project management and not so much hands-on, doing the contract documents, that sort of thing. So the small amount that I needed to do I was still hand drafting. So even though I made a number of attempts to learn CAD [Computer-Aided Design] it never really took because I never

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really learned it enough and now I just use Sketch-Up if I need to.

SF: Can you identify some of your favorite projects that you've worked on?!!!!!!!!!!

LS: Oh, let's see—I think definitely one of my all-time favorites were the CCC log buildings in Oregon and the zigzag area outside Mt. Hood and in the Columbia Gorge. There were quite a few of them.

SF: Would you rehabilitate them? Would you reconstruct them? Was it more measuring?

L: It was a whole range of actually hands-on repairs—log-work, wood shingled roofs, masonry fireplaces and the like.

SF: Any other favorite projects?

LS: Oh, the Furnace Run Covered Bridge in Ohio.

SF: Why was that a favorite project?

LS: Well, I was always drawn to carpentry and timber framing so that was—that was the kind of stuff I really wanted to do more than anything.

SF: So you were actually reconstructing parts of the bridge?

LS: Yes, it had been swept away in a flood in the seventies and it was reconstructed in 86. Some of the timbers had been salvaged but they weren't stored properly and had become unusable so it was pretty much mostly reconstruction.

SF: Did you have drawings of the original bridge?

LS: Yes, there were drawings and photographs so there was enough to go off of.

SF: Were you part of actually preparing the drawings?

LS: No, I was just a member of the crew at that point.

SF: What have been some of the biggest challenges? You mentioned one was being on the roof of when you were in Jim Askins' program. But what are some challenges you've encountered through the years in your work?

LS: Oh, dealing with bureaucracy mostly. A few supervisors who were not much inclined to let me use what I felt were my best talents and tried to push me off into areas in which I didn't feel that I had as much to offer and certainly wasn't that interested in. But in general, I would say it's been a really good, really good run.

SF: So your dream at the beginning of working for the Park Service, you have at this point been with the Park Service for thirty years.

LS: Yes, in fact, I was—in fact I had no real thoughts of retiring when the Northeast Region went through a downsizing effort. They wanted to consolidate all of the offices in Boston and close down offices in Philadelphia, that kind of thing, and they offered me a buy-out and I happily took it and then they ended up not downsizing.



SF: What a loss for them though—all of your skills and experience.

LS: Didn't bother me a bit. (laughs)

SF: You have given lectures and you've written about preservation philosophy so while making decisions on projects if you have a particular building and you're just starting out, what are some of the underlying preservation principles or theories that guide you in your decision making?

LS: I am a big believer in preservation as a process of understanding what's there—the materials that are there, the workmanship, all of the things that went into making that resource. And trying to be as respectful as possible in doing repair, replacement in-kind, that sort of thing. And of course my interest in tools and technology, I think sort of gives me a mindset of wanting to preserve the skills as well as the materials themselves. I think that the

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US approach to preservation broadly is very much rooted in the bricks and mortar, in the artifact, whereas in some cultures like Japanese and Chinese work, there's much more invested in the skills, the workmanship, the knowledge that go into it. Rather than just preserving the artifact by all means.

SF: When you are in a building and you see—well it doesn't matter what kind of building—but you're looking at the existing building—what's that process in your mind? What are you seeing? What are you thinking about?

LS: Well, I'm always trying to understand how it was actually built and what the thought processes were in the mind's of the builders. And my friend Rudy Christian, who's a timber framer always talks about trying to put yourself in the boots of the builders and that's what I'm trying to understand and what I'm trying to figure out.

SF: You've also been involved in a lot of organizations, in fact founding several organizations to share your skills and to expand the skills of the preservation community. Can you talk a little bit about what some of these organizations are?

LS: Yeah, it was very interesting. When I was working in the Washington office in the early nineties, I had been a member on and off of the Association for Preservation Technology [APT] for a number of years and I knew that there were a lot of people who felt kind of like I did that when you went to an APT conference, there were all of these presentations and somebody would show all of these slides of this building before restoration and the building after restoration and it was like nothing ever happened in between. But it was the architect who made this restoration happen and a lot of people in the trades had tried over the years to try to have a little bit more of

a presence in APT and a little bit more recognition about what they were bringing to the table. And I think it was in 1995, the year of the government shutdown, when the APT Conference was held in Washington, DC and because of the shutdown there was very, very, very poor attendance. And it was a real—it was a crisis for APT. But out of that conference, I remember there was a round table discussion of people that were working in the trades, or doing trade's education, that were trying to address this perceived problem of the trades not really being recognized in APT. So that was when the idea was hatched by Brian Blundell, who was a contractor in Bethesda, and some other people to have a working group within the Association for Preservation Technology called Preservation Trades Network [PTN]. And the operative principle behind forming PTN was that PTN would have a event every year—a workshop—at which trades people would be invited to come and do hands-on demonstrations and the thinking was that tradespeople, and this was true to a degree, tradespeople don't generally want to get up, put on a suit and tie, and give a Powerpoint. But if you put tools in their hand and let them show what it is in that they do, they are generally very happy to do it. And so the first event held by the Preservation Trades Network was the International Preservation Trades Workshop which was sponsored by Tom McGrath and the Historic Preservation Training Center in Frederick, Maryland in 1995.

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And all of these tradespeople showed up. They had five hundred people registered for this program and it was a resounding success and ultimately PTN did split off from the Association for Preservation Technology and become its own nonprofit entity. But in 2012 APT and PTN had a joint conference in Charleston [South Carolina] which was very successful and highly regarded.

SF: So they continue to both thrive and both focus on different aspects of preservation but... working together.

LS: Yeah, and PTN still is more oriented towards the hands-on people but typically draws a good crowd of architects, engineers, home owners, other people that are interested in the traditional trades, to their events. And with the programs like the American College for the Building Arts and that kind of thing, there are more—Belmont College—more good trades' training programs out there and the Park Service has over the last couple of years has really been taking a lead through the Preservation Trades Center [NPS Historic Preservation Training Center - HPTC] with this traditional trades apprenticeship program which interestingly enough is being done in conjunction with Preservation Maryland who is the nonprofit partner for each HPTC on this trades' initiative. So there's a lot going on and over time, things I think, are looking up. I mean it used to be said that the traditional trades were disappearing, that it was just a few old-timers that knew this stuff but now it's increasingly young people and women and diverse groups that are becoming involved and interested in doing this.

SF: That's great and you were really at the forefront of making that happen.

LS: I was at the right place at the right time and with just an amazing group of people that all had the same vision.

SF: What about the Timber Framers Guild? Were you...

LS: The Timber Framers Guild is another amazing organization. I came to that a little bit later but I first heard about the Timber Framers Guild when I was in the Preservation Trades Program at Williamsport. There was this itinerant timber framer that came through and stopped at the shop one day—we were building log gates or something out in the yard. And he stopped and wanted to see what we were doing and we got talking and he had just come from this Timber Framers Guild rendezvous where they built this covered bridge that was just this incredible thing. He was all excited talking about the Guild and I'd never heard of them. And then about the same time there was a short lived design magazine called "Design Spirit" and it was a really good magazine and I read an interview with a guy named Ed Levin who was a timber framer, one of the founding members of the Timber Framers Guild—this engineer, and visionary and person that was talking in these almost metaphysical terms about timber-framing and design and I'm like, Wow! I was blown away by it.

SF: So you became involved with...

LS: Well it all happened sort-of—it was interesting, I was in the Washington office and I had grant funding to put on a training course. And I wanted to get someone to come in and talk about historic timber framing from the Guild so I called Ed Levin and he couldn't do it but he put me in touch with some other people who came in and were incredible instructors, just brilliant. And that sort of got me to where I started to know people in the Guild and I was invited to do a presentation at a Guild Conference in Skamania [Lodge, Washington State] in 95 or 96 and remained involved with the Guild after that and when I retired from the Park Service they asked me if I would run for the board,

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which I did, and did a term as president so I remained really, really impressed and inspired with what the Guild does.

SF: What do you see as your important career milestones?

LS: Well, of course, getting my architectural license—that was a big one. But of all the things that I think maybe I sort of look back on and sort of go, Wow, was that I was working on the Furnace Run Covered Bridge and of course I was considerably younger then than I am now but I got to the point where I could drive a sixty penny galvanized spike through a piece of three inch Southern yellow pine decking with two blows of the hammer.

SF: Whoa.

LS: So I thought, Yeah, that's pretty cool.

SF: That's cool, yes definitely. What do you see as your legacy?

LS: Well, it's not that I feel as though I've done that much to make it happen but the fact that it's now much less unusual for women to be at even the traditional trades. And to be sought after as instructors and teachers and trainers, I mean, there's some amazing women out there that are doing just incredible work and I mean it's just light years ahead of the stuff I was doing back when I was at HPTC and that kind of thing but I feel like I was at least sort of in the vanguard of that becoming more of a possibility.

SF: And do you see that the construction trades have changed also in their acceptance of women working in the field, and alongside them and...

LS: It's hard to judge. I think the general construction trades probably still have a long way to go. I think in the trades that are specifically related to preservation, conservation, that kind of thing, that there's much more acceptance of it and indeed, respect and admiration for women.

SF: And you were a big part of making that happen. How do you see preservation or architecture in general addressing the issues of climate change or sustainability because you, with your work in the Park Service, have dealt with projects in parks or right on the front line of dealing with climate change issues?

LS: Absolutely, and I think that it's critical that we think more in terms of resilience of communities and preservation is not just this sort of act of static maintenance of old buildings but there has to be a realization that resilient buildings are buildings that are already built and that the traditional building trades have a big role to play in making new sustainable architecture. And in some respects, I think we would almost be better if we stopped talking about preservation so much and started talking more about resilience in local buildings and local materials and that kind of thing.

SF: If you could change anything in the profession, what would you change?

LS: I think if—I've always thought that nobody should be allowed to get a degree in architecture without spending at least a year working hands-on in construction.

SF: Yes. What advice would you give a young architect contemplating preservation work in terms of the best path to follow, maybe what you just talked about in terms of what you were just talking about—spending a year in the field.

LS: Well, that would certainly be my advice—would be to try to do some hands-on work, not with the anticipation that you're going to spend your life building window sash or repointing brick or something but so you'll have a better appreciation and understanding for how

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that works and how tradespeople work and why they're important and why that communication is important.

SF: And what about if you were working with a property owner of a historic structure and they don't know anything and they want to restore it or rehabilitate it. What would your advice to them be?

LS: Well, I would want to gauge their willingness, interest, ability to maybe do some of the work themselves. And to find out what that might be and hook them up with opportunities to learn how to do that work or to hook them up with the right kinds of tradespeople and professionals and contractors and builders.

SF: Is there a national database or something that says if a property owner wanted somebody who could repair a particular kind of roof or something else—that they could go to that database and know that they were getting...

LS: No there really is not and it's a hard to problem to come to grips with. Anecdotally the single most asked question of historic—SHPOs [State Historic Preservation Officers] Offices is where do I find a contractor that can do "x" and it's pretty much anecdotal, it's who knows who. The SHPO's in State Historic Preservation Offices—it's hard for them to really weed out the good and the bad. And a lot of times they rely on people to self submit their credentials and say, "Hey, I do window repair or I do 'x' and 'x'". So a lot of it's just word of mouth.

SF: What's been one of the biggest disappointments to you in terms, well in general, with all of your work through the years?

LS: If I had it to do over again, I wish that I could have early in my career, gotten more hands on experience. If for example there had been an American College of the Building Arts when I was coming up I would have been really interested in looking at a route like that. Not that I have ever regretted for a moment being an architect or getting a degree in architecture but the most satisfying thing for me has always been the ability to work with my hands.

SF: Is there a building type that you haven't worked on yet that you would love to?

LS: Oh wow. I can't really think of anything.

SF: How about building something for yourself? Has that always been a goal to build something for yourself. I mean, I know that I just saw a [wooden] boat, a skiff that you have built?

LS: Yeah, that's been something I've always wanted to do is build a boat and I wouldn't mind building a couple more boats.

SF: How about a house?

LS: No, if I had been younger when I moved to Rock Hall, I only been here four years now, but if I'd been in my thirties, I would have thought very seriously about building a timber frame for my shop instead of putting in a pole building.

SF: Yes, to be able to use those skills. So are there any other—are there other stories or things that you would like to add?

LS: Oh, let's see. A lot of the stuff I probably couldn't repeat in mixed company from the old days at the Williamsport Historic Preservation Training Center. (laughs) But no, it's been a fun and wild ride and I never would have imagined how many opportunities to go to cool places and work on cool things and work with great people that I've had.

SF: What do you see as your greatest accomplishment?

LS: Well, I think a lot of the work that Preservation Trades Network did in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina was really meaningful. PTN worked in partnership

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with the World Monuments Fund and the University of Florida Preservation Program and documented and disassembled a historic structure in Bay St. Louis and preserved that. We worked in the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans. Homeowners that had been in some of these houses for three/four generations and were told that their historic buildings couldn't be salvaged and we were able to go in and do assessments and say, "Yes, they can be and they are worth saving." And I think that really did make a difference. And in 2006 the Preservation Trades Network made the decision to hold the International Preservation Trades Workshop in the Lower Ninth Ward that year. And to not charge admission—to throw it open to anybody and to bring in as many volunteers from all over the country and abroad to assess and work on historic buildings. PTN teams restored the [Greater] Little Zion Baptist Church in the Ninth Ward in the Holy Cross District and it became kind of a community center for a lot of the other salvage and restoration efforts that were going on there.

SF: Have you kept in touch with those people?

LS: Some of them, very much so, yes.

SF: That's fascinating. That must have been such a boost to them.

LS: I think it made a difference. I think it was a good thing.

SF: Yeah, especially when you have an engineer or a city official saying, "No, that your house is not salvageable." And then you come and you're able to make it—just by understanding the building materials and how to work with them. Is that an area that the Preservation Trades Network has stayed involved in or do they sort of go to areas that are the most critical?

LS: PTN doesn't really have the capacity to do that at present. I think it would be something that would be great if we had a longer term institutional partnership with other groups to be able to do those sorts of things.

SF: What a—what a great project.

LS: Oh, it was an incredible experience.

SF: So are there any other issues or anything you'd like to add?

LS: I can't think of anything.

SF: Well, thank you Lisa and well, you're continuing to do work now through Quid Tum and anything you want to mention about that kind of work that you're doing?

LS: Well, I really—I work with the Park Service and the Vanishing Treasures Program but apart from that I'm pretty happy just building boats and making wine.

SF: Sounds wonderful. Well, thank you very much for sharing your time and your expertise and your journey and your experiences.

LS: Thank you, it's been a pleasure talking with you.

Interview Ended

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