

Johnny P. Johnson: Accomplished Local Artist, Teacher and Civil Rights Activist (Part II) -- 2/20/2006

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Interviewed by Nancy Bruns*

This is tape two with Mr. Johnny P. Johnson, Fredericksburg artist and civil rights activist. This interview is conducted in Mr. Johnson's studio, previously the viewing room of the funeral room which an earlier occupant operated at 1311 Charles St., Fredericksburg. Mr. Johnson and his wife began married life across the street at 1308 Charles St., and eventually Mr. Johnson established an art studio at 1311 Charles. At the conclusion of the previous interview, Mr. Johnson promised to talk about history and life on the 1300 block of Charles Street during a second interview.

Tape 2 August 14, 1997, with Johnny P. Johnson

Interviewer: You've had the studio here--for how many years in this building? (is referring to Johnny Johnson's art studio at 1311 Charles St., Fredericksburg)

Mr. Johnson: For approximately 25 years. We didn't own it ... This was owned by the Kay family (Kay). Mr. Dallas Kay and Mrs. Gussie Kay, they were the owners. They had one son, Montgomery Kay, and when his parents passed away, he was left as the heir to the property. In this block in the 1300 block-- they owned the funeral home where the studio is now--a cleaning and pressing business which is next door. And skipping a house and going down to the corner, they owned that home. When my wife and I bought the property--we had to buy both pieces. This is 1311 and that is 1313...

What you don't see... Mr. Kay had a cleaning and pressing business and the building was brick, the front part. Of course to get equipment in, he added the cinderblock part of it, which you see remaining now.

They had let the building go, the property--for whatever reason. The front part of the property, the Architectural Review Board reluctantly--though it was unanimous--allowed me to tear down.

It was in such bad shape it would have been kind of impracticable, if not impossible, to restore it.

When I didn't own the property and didn't think I would be able to purchase it, I did things to keep it from falling down and to keep them from being sued. Mr. Kay said, "If I sell it to anybody I'll sell it to you," but the buildings just kept going down. Both of them (the properties at 1311 and 1313 Charles Street)...

Historically speaking that building (1313) housed the best plow company in America... the Farmers Friendly Plough Co.

Someone researched the Hunter family. Mr. George Hunter who was very prominent here in Fredericksburg. The Hunter family evidently owned that property and from what I can gather they would ship plows to Europe and all over the country right from there.

The building (the brick part) was built probably in the mid to late 1800s--the one that we had to tear down.

The walls had caved in... they had sand and I've forgotten what else for mortar--and from what I can gather it didn't hold up. You and I could push one side of the building down if we could be assured it would not buckle back on us.

That's how weak it was. That's after the bulldozer came and took the remaining part of the roof that was just caved in. The walls just had nothing to support.. So I had to take the 10 pictures and take them to the Architectural Review Board and (explain) what I planned to do with the building.. this area was looking terrible. This was an eyesore.

Even the studio. One time I paid to have it painted and to have a roof put on in the back in the area that was then the embalming room. At one point, the building had garages that would take you almost to the other street. Mrs. Bailey told me that she had a clothes line up there and she could just walk out on the roof.

Interviewer: Did the Baileys live over the funeral home?

Mr. Johnson: Sure, they lived in the apartment that we have rented out. The major difference is that the front room you know to where the double doors are (gesturing to the front area of the studio) was the area that was his office. Where the closets are now was the stairway and the stairway went up to the Baileys bedroom. He could just walk right down. The phone was over there (rear corner of the front area of the studio). The sliding doors that you see ... this would be the viewing room. They would open the doors and you could get 50 or 60

people in ... it would be kind of crowded but you didn't have a whole lot of furniture in the main part.

Interviewer: Do you know how long Mr. Bailey was here?

Mr. Johnson: I think it was in the early 50s until the mid-60s ... to my knowledge.

When I came here (1959), I stayed here (in Fredericksburg) two years and then Jean and I were married and then we lived across the street from what was then the funeral home and which is now the studio. I was to realize later on that Mr. Bailey was planning a move because Mr. Kay would not sell him the property. He was leasing. He had a lease.

When I first started renting, I rented it from Mr. Bailey. I was subleasing it. Bart Daniels, who was a student of mine at James Monroe, and I paid \$30 a month. Well we paid \$30 combined--\$15 apiece and because he didn't use it that much, I took care of the utilities. A lady down the street gave me an oil stove so we had heat and a sink in the back, but no bathroom.

This was 1971. It's been about 26 years that I have actually been in here ... then I was about to give it up. Give up on the whole idea. You know there was no insulation, and I couldn't buy it. I just kept putting money in. I would paint and I would do things that were absolutely necessary.

And so after we retired and Mr. Kay had passed away and Mrs. Kay decided it would be okay for me to buy it. I didn't realize what I was getting into.

Interviewer: You didn't know you would have to tear it down?
(referring to the old front part of 1313 Charles St.)

Mr. Johnson: I knew that. I had already had someone put up wood to keep it from falling over on someone on the street. I was worried. I said if they are sued then there's no possibility of my ever having it. You know in the back of mind I always hoped, but when we were near retirement and nothing was forthcoming, Jean and I just assumed that we wouldn't get it. And I was trying to think of alternative plans. Maybe building a studio at home and renting a small place over town so I would still have an outlet.

Interviewer: For your students?

Mr. Johnson: But it never was a studio that was for teaching. Mainly it was a place for me to work and put my junk. You know I had paintings all over the place and I stored some of Paul Muick's work-- a sculptor-- and I stored some of his larger paintings that he had shown at the Virginia Museum back in the 70s and I had some of his sculptures and his bas reliefs here. It is pretty big.

If you could imagine four inches more taken on the sides because it didn't have the stucco. This building had two sets of bricks and then the stucco.

Interviewer: What had it been before it was a funeral home?

Mr. Johnson: I just don't know ... I haven't researched it that far back. It may have been built as a funeral home. because it was Kay's Funeral Home and then it became Kay and Baileys and then Baileys. There were several morticians who worked here. A Mr. Hale was one.

But when Mr. Bailey built the funeral home in Mayfield this became vacant. I think his sister moved upstairs.

Ambrose--who is on the city council now--was a little boy, and Ambrose would play undertaker.

Ambrose has wanted to be an undertaker or mortician for as long as I have known him and I started knowing him in 1959 when I came to Fredericksburg. He would play ... have them fine up and the body would be in one of the little wagons. The body--sometimes it was his dog. I mentioned that because it's like my case in that I have always wanted to be an artist not that I went through the changes that Ambrose did in terms of actually acting out, I just drew a lot. But Ambrose would have the little kids in the neighborhood become flower girls and pall bearers.

His brother Anthony just went along with it. Anthony wanted to do something else. He had a way with words and--I guess--what other better field than law.

But I watched them grow up. Right here.

Interviewer: You lived in 1308 Charles... do you know anything about that house?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, it was owned by the Grant family--Mr. Jason Grant--it was part of their property. And he was the person for whom part of Walker- Grant School was named...

We rented from either Mr. Grant's daughter or his sister ... Carolyn Grant was a musician. She taught at Howard University for years ... she rented that property to us--five rooms upstairs--for \$40 a month. And look, it was that way for 10 years ... it was only the last two years that we paid \$50 a month.

She was not interested in making a whole lot of profit ... she had money and when I would see her, it would be maybe for Memorial Day when the family would come down, or something like that. I saw her more on the elevator in the Fine Arts Building when I was working on my MFA up at Howard than I did all of the years we were here.

Interviewer: Is that an old house?

Mr. Johnson: I think it is... Mr. Wheeler (occupant of the first floor at 1308) worked for Gari Melchers from the time he was 11 years old and he probably knew more about Mr. Melchers as a man than anybody else in this area ... They had been there (1308) since the late 1940s or the early 50s. He was telling me something about that building, something about a sun porch that they moved from another place in town ... it's interesting that the historic zoning ends right at the end of the 1300 block.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Mr. Johnson: I don't know. It wreaked havoc with me in one sense. What happened is no one could deny that this hadn't been used as a studio. It was more of a place for me to paint and store my junk. When we purchased it, it was grandfathered in. (The studio was allowed in the historic area because of the Grandfather Clause in the law).

But in terms of a sign, I could put a sign but I would have to go through the proper steps. For me, it is not a problem. One of the reasons is it's the type of studio where you have to be here by appointment ... you're not going to find me here during set hours. I would hate to have a sign out there--even though it be approved--and people say you're never there. At some point in my life, if I ever get to be a business artist, I might try to put something out there...

The St. James House on the corner is very historic. When we lived on Charles Street, two professors from Virginia Commonwealth--they called it RPI ... had it. When the last one passed the property was left to the Historic Foundation or the state. An artist friend of mine, Elizabeth Pavlansky Butler, directs it.

In the next block, of course, you have the Mary Washington House and then the infamous slave block is on the corner and then the James Monroe Museum. So Charles Street from the Methodist Church is pretty interesting.

Interviewer: Go this way now. (Gesturing in the opposite direction along Charles Street).

Mr. Johnson: I don't know why it (historic district) was stopped. On the corner (of the 1300 block) Mrs. Gussie Kay used to have a kindergarten or a nursery school. Back then you didn't have kindergartens in the schools. They came in the public schools in Fredericksburg since I've been here. You have Mrs. Came Golden... Mrs. Golden was a very colorful lady. Many of her students are still here... Also Mrs. Gussie Kay's. The lady next door... went to that school ... Her name is Kathleen Bryant... So you had these schools. I don't know how many others. These are two that I've heard of Mrs. Kay passed before I came I believe, but Mrs. Golden was still active.

They kept asking me and saying "Johnny, you must go to one of Mrs. Golden's --Miss Carrie they called her--Miss Carrie's graduations." You wouldn't believe it. It was almost like the changing of the guard at Arlington, in terms of the precision that the children had...

Miss Carrie was a taskmaster. Some of the parents liked that, but one lady told me, "My son had a nervous breakdown." I never heard of a kindergartener having a nervous breakdown. I later taught him... Some kids can't stand that very rigid type (of education ...) We talk about learning styles. I think it has some validity...

The parent was not negative about Miss Carrie.

Dr. Bowes lived next door to us on Charles Street. He died about five years ago. He was a dentist and he was in his 90s...

Mrs. Marian Bowes, who was his wife, was the librarian at Walker-Grant for many years. The Bowes family will give you some connections and also the Norbrey family on Charles Street.

Mrs. Norbrey has been ailing in a hospital in Arlington for a long time. Her husband, Mr. Bumpsey Norbrey, was well known here. He had a trash business and later a band. He died before I came here ... But the business was carried on by his son, Maurice. I remember a man, Mr. Morton, who used to drive the truck for Mr. Maurice Norbrey ... Maurice would be a good person (to interview) ... he has a wealth of information.

For more information:

[Johnny P. Johnson](#)

An interview from the Foundation's Oral History Project, the purpose of which was to interview, tape and transcribe interviews with various members of the community who could tell about important area events. Recorded July 1, 1997 in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

[Johnny Johnson](#)

Interview with Johnny P. Johnson on DVD filmed May 7, 2003.

[Civil rights: Fredericksburg's story](#)

In this forum sponsored by the Young Adult Department of the Central Rappahannock Regional Library, leaders from Fredericksburg discuss their experiences with racism and the city's response to the civil rights struggle of the 1960s.