SAVING PRESERVATION STORIES: DIVERSITY AND THE OUTER BOROUGH

The Reminiscences of

Yvonne Taylor

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Yvonne Taylor conducted by Interviewer Leyla Vural on July 15, 2015. This interview is part of the *Saving Preservation Stories: Diversity and the Outer Borough* oral history project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Yvonne Taylor speaks about her family's long history in the Sandy Ground Community, as well as her own childhood there. Her interest in preservation, sparked by a news article about the neighborhood, inspired her and other residents to found the Sandy Ground Historical Society. They conducted oral histories of longtime residents and worked toward designating the AME Zion Church and Cemetery, the cottages, and the Coleman House. The Sandy Ground Historical Society does a lot of outreach, working with children in local schools, and quilting classes.

Yvonne Taylor is an advocate for preservation and community history in Sandy Ground, one of the oldest surviving communities founded by free blacks in the United States. Taylor is the descendant of one of Sandy Ground's earliest families, the Coleman family, and the owner of the oldest standing house in Sandy Ground, the Coleman House. Influential in founding the Sandy Ground Historical Society in the 1970s, Taylor also served as former president of the society. Her efforts witnessed the addition of Sandy Ground to the National Register of Historic Places in 1982, and a triumphant landmark designation from the Landmarks Preservation Commission for the Sandy Ground cemetery in 1985 and the Sandy Ground houses in 2011.

Transcriptionist: Jackie Thipthorpe | Session: 1

Interviewee: Yvonne Taylor | Location: Staten Island, NY

Interviewer: Leyla Vural | Date: July 15, 2015

Q: It is Wednesday, July 15, 2015, around 2:00 pm. I am in the home of Yvonne Taylor on Staten Island to talk with her about Sandy Ground. Hi, Yvonne.

Taylor: Hi. How are you?

Q: I'm well, thank you.

Taylor: Good.

Q: And you?

Taylor: Doing well, thanks.

Q: Thank you *so* much for letting me into your home and taking the time to talk with me about Sandy Ground and your experiences there and the work you did there.

Taylor: It's my pleasure. I'm glad you're interested.

Q: Oh, I totally am and I really appreciate your time. So I wanted to start by asking you just to tell me a little bit about where and when you were born and what your early childhood was like.

Taylor: I was born on May 7, 1934, and I was born in the Sandy Ground community, so therefore I feel that that's been a major part of my life. I was born in Richmond Memorial Hospital, which is no longer called Richmond Memorial. The building is still there but it's been changed. And I'm an only child. Ah, do you want to know any more about my early childhood?

Q: Mm-hmm. Yes. Yes, please.

Taylor: My mother was born also in the Sandy Ground community and my grandmother was born in Manhattan, but I'll get to that a little later, and my father was born in Georgia. Unfortunately, my mother and father separated when I was about four, four-and-a-half, but I had a wonderful childhood. I lived in the Sandy Ground community in the house, which is still in the ownership of my family, and it was something that I really cherish. Sometimes people want to divorce themselves from their birthplace because they're looking for things that they didn't have then, but my childhood was wonderful.

Q: Yes. Yes. You can tell me anything you want. So I know that you're a descendant of the Coleman-Gray family. Did you know about your family history when you were a child?

Taylor: Yes. Fortunately, we lived with my grandmother so she loved to talk about her early childhood and she told me about growing up. She was born in Manhattan and at her age, about

seven I would imagine, she moved to Staten Island. She moved there because the pastor who was assigned to the Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church at that time, and he came from either Virginia or North Carolina, I'm not sure, had to move to the area of the church, of course, and he and my great grandmother had married recently. She was a widow and she came to Staten Island with him and the pastor didn't have a parsonage. There was no parsonage assigned to that pastor so he had to find a house to live in. And he found a small house in Staten Island close to the church and he and his new bride came there and lived there. And, unfortunately, he died a couple of years after he was assigned to the church and so my great grandmother was left alone.

Her son by her first marriage had moved with his family to Manhattan and when they realized that the mother was alone now they decided to move down to Staten Island so they would be near her. And not only did they move near her, they moved into the house with her. And since they had bought the house, she and her husband, it was not the property of the church, so there was no problem them living there and the house was deeded in their name. So my grandmother came to Staten Island at about the age of seven and she and her two younger brothers, with their mother and father, lived in the house and she grew up there. So that's my connection to Staten Island through my great grandmother, who happened to live there, and different generations who have lived there. As a matter of fact, there have been seven generations of my family who have lived in Staten Island in the Sandy Ground community.

Q: Can you tell me about that?

Taylor: All right. We started off with my great grandmother, whose name was Rebecca Coleman. Her husband was Reverend Isaac Coleman who was the sixth pastor of the Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church. Her daughter – I hope I'm getting this right now – no, her son, was Steven Gray. Her first husband was Steven Gray so therefore, they named their first son Steven Gray, and he's the one who had moved to Manhattan. So that was the second generation. My grandmother was Rebecca Gray Landin and she came here at the age, as I said, of seven and she lived in that house until her death at the age of 91. My mother was born in that house, Vera Landin Usry. She's the fourth generation. I hope I'm not skipping a generation here. I was born in the hospital, in Richmond Memorial Hospital as I said, in 1934, so I'm the fifth generation. My daughter was also born in Richmond Memorial Hospital and she's Yvette Taylor. I'm Yvonne Usry Taylor, because my maiden name was Usry. My daughter, Yvette Taylor, who is now Jordan, she was Yvette Taylor born on Staten Island.

Q: That's six.

Taylor: That's six. And her daughter, Noel Jordan, was born there also, so that's seven generations who were born – or lived or were born on Staten Island in the Sandy Ground community.

Q: That's tremendous.

Taylor: They all have lived in the house, which, as I said, was purchased in the – I think it was purchased in 1865. [Phone ringing]

Q: We were talking about the seven generations of your family that have all lived in the house.

Taylor: Oh, okay.

Q: So when you – how did you learn your family history?

Taylor: Well, as I said, I lived with my grandmother, I grew up in that house, and she liked to talk and she liked to reminisce and I loved to listen. I was always just enthralled when she would start talking about the past and for some reason I just recognized at an early age how important history was, and so the stories that she told to me were fascinating. She told me things about that I would not have known had she not been willing to share with me. And so that's how I knew a lot of it and a lot of it retained. And then a lot of things she used to write down and she used to keep things in a little tin box. And after she passed, I just happened to come across some of these things and I recognized the importance of it. She wrote down – I don't know if this is interesting enough to share. [Chuckles]

Q: It is. Please do.

Taylor: She was always fascinated in finding more out about her family history, but she knew that originally her family had come from North Carolina. So after her marriage, she had a couple of children. My grandmother had several children. She had 12 altogether but only six lived to maturity. She decided she was going to take a trip and visit the town in which she knew they

grew up in, and she did. Which was something in that time, that period of time, for a young woman to decide I'm leaving my family, because I know that they'll be well taken care of, and I'm going to trace my roots. And she wrote down some of the things that occurred while she went on this trip.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Taylor: I have some letters.

Q: Do you know when that was?

Taylor: I don't think that they were dated but perhaps I could get it.

Q: Well, you know, we can talk about that later.

Taylor: Okay.

Q: So when you were growing up, were you also being told about Sandy Ground, do you remember?

Taylor: Oh, yes, because my grandfather, my grandmother's husband, he came from Maryland also and he was an oysterman. So I knew that that was an oyster town and I knew why they came there because of so many repressive laws were enacted in Maryland at that time. So

therefore the black oystermen some of them could no longer engage in the trade that they had been doing all of their lives and they had to look for employment in other areas, because they used to occasionally come up the coast and they used to do the digging of the oysters in the beds in Prince's Bay. So they were aware of the fact that the oyster industry in this area was really quite a thriving industry. So many of them decided that they were going to leave their homes and move north, and this is what they did. So therefore, I knew that this is what my grandfather did. I still have a picture of his identification card when he was in the oyster industry.

Q: So your family actually is original Sandy Ground from both sides then.

Taylor: I guess you can say that, yes, because he as an oysterman and she as a buddy who was the daughter or some – her father, Steven Gray, who lived in Manhattan, came here with his family, I think he was either a butler or he did something in that line of work. I'm not sure exactly what because some of the letters of kind of difficult to understand exactly what he did. But they all managed to make a living at the things that they enjoyed and had learned how to do early in life.

Q: That's tremendous. So can I ask you how you think Sandy Ground and knowing about it and growing up there influenced how you think about – like how it shaped your life growing into adulthood?

Taylor: Well, I think for one thing I recognized the fact that it was a community where families looked out for not only their immediate family members but they looked out for each other. It

was a large community family, although many of them were not related but there was always a feeling of protecting each other and looking out for each other and being proud of each other. And I think that that is something that today is lacking in most communities and I'm really very fortunate that I lived in a town in which this happened.

And I lived on – if you're familiar with the area – Woodrow Road, it was not the main road but Bloomingdale Road, which abuts it, was the main road, and then Clay Pit Road off of that was another road, and these were the roads on which most of the African American families lived. On Woodrow Road, there were only two families that lived on that street, and that was my family and my grandmother's family and next to it Joseph Bishop, who was the blacksmith in the town, they lived in the next house. And I guess I was kind of sheltered in a way because most of my thoughts and memories are from being on Woodrow Road and my cousins lived next door, so I played with my cousin and that was usually the extent of my playing was at an early age. But we attended church services together and there was a great feeling of camaraderie among the people who lived there, because I think we all came from similar backgrounds, had similar experiences, and shared each other's ideas and thoughts and dreams with each other. So it was a great place to be brought up in.

Q: That's great. What kind of work were people doing when you were growing up, since the oyster industry was no longer an industry at that point?

Taylor: Well, I know that my grandfather went to Rye, New York, where his eldest daughter lived with her husband, Vap, and he went there to work. He found work there because there

wasn't any work available in the immediate community where we lived. And he used to come home on weekends, but not every weekend. From the letters that I have read and the things that my grandmother has told me over the years, I recognize the fact that he looked forward to those times when he was able to leave the job that he had there and to be able to come home. And I'm sure a lot of other people probably did something similar if they had relatives who lived in another part of the area that they could occasionally come home, in order just to find employment, they did. Many of them were farmers so therefore people still have to eat, so farming was still something that many of the men would still engage in. Everyone, even those people who are not farmers, everyone had a garden so they were able to grow food that would take their family through the week and through the month and preserve what they could for the winter. I sound like I'm about 125, don't I?

Q: No, you don't. Well, so that makes me actually want to ask you about the community. I think it was quite rural then, is that right?

Taylor: Yes. Yes.

Q: Can you kind of describe what it looked like?

Taylor: Ah … I think when it was first settled by the African Americans, the migrants who came there, I think that most of them had to find a house, if there was one available, or they used to get together and build a little house that would hold their family until they could do something better. And I think that, as I said, Bloomingdale Road was the street where most of the family

members lived and then some on Clay Pit Road, some on Sharrotts Road, and each family they made out with what they had. No one was wealthy. Some people were able to have their own business, which helped made them a little bit more financially stable than others. But because they were able to grow their own food and to share, I think there was a lot of camaraderie there. People cared for each other and if they saw a need of another family and they could help to fill that need, they did. So I think that's something that's lacking today. It was a good community to grow up in.

Q: Do you think of it as a rural community at that point?

Taylor: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely, because we were really farmers and those people who weren't farmers, you know those who no longer were in the oyster industry, they had to find some kind of employment someplace else. But there was no manufacturing in the area, there were no businesses in the area, so it was definitely a rural community.

Q: And did women go to paying jobs?

Taylor: Not – well, that depends on what period of time we're talking about.

Q: When you were growing up.

Taylor: When I was growing up, my mother worked as a house worker for some of the neighboring white families, and so that was her way of being able to support us after she and my

father separated, and I think a lot of the other women did. Some took in laundry for some of the white families. I think everybody found a way to make enough to be able to maintain their home and to keep their family in food and clothing and the necessities of life and then they would share with each other when necessary. You know, everybody wanted to help each other, so.

Q: And were the white families interspersed in Sandy Ground or were they actually separate?

Taylor: Well, at the time that the community was really just beginning to grow, there were several white families that were already there and so at that time the African American families were moving in and building little houses or finding houses that they could rent, and most of the white families remained there. And there was usually a very good, close feeling among black and white. It wasn't that they're moving in and does that mean that we have to white flight, you know, it wasn't that type of atmosphere. Eventually, some of those families as they got older, you know the elder members died and maybe the younger ones no longer wanted to live there, they wanted to go to other areas. So in the beginning I think that there was quite a warm feeling among all families. It's kind of hard to believe sometimes with the things you hear today. But I don't recall anybody talking about any animosity. It was just a question of these are people who are here, they're working, they want to better their lives and they were accepted as such. Maybe this is the kind of rose-colored glasses I've been looking through all of my life. Maybe someone else would have a different story to tell if they had a different experience.

Q: But you don't remember sort of the harshness that people often describe in terms of how African Americans were treated?

Taylor: I don't. I honestly don't. I'm not saying that perhaps there weren't incidents when this did occur, but not something that I was aware of or that I experienced. And children went to school with each other and families just seemed to understand that this is another family and we'll all get along. Again, as I said, maybe this is my experience. Now perhaps somebody else would have a different story to tell, and I certainly would not question their story, but I don't recall that.

Q: Well, we're interested in hearing your experience. So I wanted to ask you about the house. So did you spend your entire childhood in the house?

Taylor: Childhood and early adulthood. I lived there until I got married and even after marriage we had an apartment for a couple of years, then we came back to that house for a few years.

Q: So could you describe the house for me? I've only seen it from the outside. So can you kind of walk me through it, room by room, what it was like when you were a child in the '30s?

Taylor: Okay. When I was a child, the house was I think they used to say this is a 13-room house. Facing from the street, I lived on the side which was on the left side of the house, and I lived there with my mother and my father in the early years. And my grandmother at that time lived on the other side of the house because her husband had died. He died the same year I was born. And we had an apartment, which had what we called an outside kitchen, which you came into from the back of the house. And I don't know why they called it an outside kitchen, aside

from the fact that it was attached to the main kitchen, which was another door that you went through, and that's where we would keep the icebox. Now do you want me to tell you about early years?

Q: Yes, please.

Taylor: Okay. The icebox was kept in the outside kitchen. There was also a coal bin in the outside kitchen where a man would deliver coal. That was our fuel for the house. And off of the outside kitchen was the regular kitchen, which was a kitchen with a coal-burning stove and an oil-burning stove also. Now the oil for the oil-burning stove was kept at one time a garage in the back of the house, away from the house. And so every day you would go out and fill up a jug of oil to use that. And this was used not only for cooking, but also for heat. And there was no oven – no, there was an oven in the coal burning stove and sometimes if you had something extra that you wanted to cook in an oven, there were portable ovens, which you could put on top of the oil-burning stove to cook something there.

I'm really going back.

Off of the kitchen was a living room and the living room was heated in the winter by an oil burning small pot-bellied stove, and then off of that was a very small bedroom, and that was the apartment that was on that side. There was a staircase leading up from that – there was a very small entrance hall, which also led to a front door going outside and the staircase going upstairs, and there were two bedrooms in the section. Okay, that's the section that we lived in.

And then on the other side, where my grandmother lived, there was a front door, which when you came in there was a long hall. And they had a bathroom, an indoor bathroom when I was growing, which to me seemed like quite a luxury. There was no hot water coming into this so you had to heat water to take a bath but at least you had indoor plumbing, and so we also used that bathroom. And then off of that, there were two rooms on the right of the hall and then on the other side there was a living room, an entrance for the living room, and then the kitchen – off of the living room a kitchen, and then another little room off of the kitchen which would lead to the outside. Now I don't know if I painted enough of a picture for you to visualize what this house looked like.

Q: Do you know if it had always been really two separate residences or was that something that happened over time?

Taylor: It happened over time because when the original family, the Coleman, Reverend Coleman and his wife, when they came it was a smaller house, so that would accommodate them for their needs. But after my great grandfather came there with his family and the families grew, the house had to be enlarged in order to accommodate the other families. So it grew to what we used to say was either a 12 or 13-room house. Today the house is a little different.

Q: So let's stay in your childhood just for a little bit longer.

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Q: What do you remember sort of some of the quirks were of the house, like did it have eccentricities that you enjoyed or that you noticed?

Taylor: Well, you know, in retrospect I guess there were a lot of quirks. But when you're living with something maybe you don't recognize them as quirks. I don't remember any ghosts stories or things like that that you might imagine living in an older house you would hear about, I don't remember that. Now I can see some of the things that we just took for granted, you know, having to shovel coal and go outside to get oil. We did have, in my lifetime, we did have electricity in the house. We even had a telephone one time in the early years, which to me seemed like really a luxury.

Q: Yes. In the '30s?

Taylor: Maybe in the early '40s. Yeah.

Q: Okay. Okay.

Taylor: But I don't remember any ghosts story or thinking anything that would be – you know. I'm trying to remember. [Laughs]

Q: So can you tell me how the house changed over time, over your lifetime?

Taylor: Well, as I said, I think some of the walls were removed to make larger rooms. Today they aren't – I used to say it was a 13-room house, today it's not. It's a two-family house now. And we have central heating of course and all the other conveniences that people would have in a home that they would build today. The only thing it's an old house and so therefore there's always something that needs to be repaired or replaced. This winter we had a problem with pipes bursting under the house because it was very cold and they needed to be wrapped, and weren't, so things such as that. There is only a small cellar but no basement under the whole house. So it's a pretty large house and it's maybe only two feet off the ground, so therefore you have to be very careful about making sure that things do not freeze underneath, the pipes and things do not freeze. And the cellar accommodates the furnace and that's about all that's there, just room for that.

Q: And how have you converted it into two completely separate parts?

Taylor: Well, there were always two front entrances so it really didn't take too much to convert it because the section that I lived in was smaller so there was a door that divided the two sections when I was a child. So I could go right from my part of the house into my grandmother's part of the house through this door. So that was closed off to make a wall there, which automatically divided it into two families. So each family has a front and a rear entrance. As a matter fact, the larger apartment has a rear entrance, a side entrance and a front entrance, so.

Q: And the smaller one at some point you must have had to add a bathroom.

Taylor: Oh, yes. Yes, that was – oh, yes, definitely. So the bathroom was added where that outside kitchen used to be, and so that was rebuilt to make a bathroom and a small room off the bathroom.

Q: And roughly when was that?

Taylor: Ah, that was … just trying to think, because in my early youth, we only had the one bathroom and since we were one family we used the bathroom on the larger side. So I would say that was done maybe about … oh, 50 years ago or so.

Q: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit more about the community when you were growing up and a young adult? Like can you tell me about some other people who lived in Sandy Ground?

Taylor: Well, there were many families, the Cooper family, the Moody family, the Roach family, Landin family, and I think we saw each other most of the time at church services and church activities; at least that was my recollection. And maybe because most of those families lived closer to each other than I did and maybe I was sheltered, I don't know why. But the families were – it was a community where families really looked out for each other and took care of any needs that they could take care of for another family and it was one that you really felt that you all belonged to the same community. It was truly a community in the true sense of the word. If you recognized that someone needed something that you could fill that need well, you would do it. And if they knew that a family was having any problems, financial problems, or if they could bring them some food or things of that nature it would just be something you would

automatically do. You would not think, you know, see anyone else in need if you could help to fill that need.

Q: You were saying you grew up next to your cousin. Was the Bishop family related to you?

Taylor: No. But there was a house next to ours on the other side and my cousins lived there. Now I don't know how early they moved there because my aunt and uncle I can't remember a time when they weren't there. So apparently, they moved into that house even before I was born. So we had the two families next to each other and most of my early childhood was spent just in that small section of Sandy Ground.

Q: Was that your mom's sister or brother?

Taylor: My mom's sister, yes.

Q: Okay. And do you – sorry.

Taylor: No. It was her sister and her husband and then her daughter and her husband moved in and then the grandchildren moved in, so there were three generations living in that house.

Q: And what was their name?

Taylor: Monroe, Decker. The Deckers came first and then the daughter married a man from the West Indies whose name was Monroe. And then eventually they built another house on the other side and the elder Deckers lived in that house. It was something that they had always wanted to do. They had a piece of property right adjacent to their property and they built a house and moved in.

Q: Are they still there?

Taylor: No. No. They aren't there and the house isn't there either. No.

Q: Yeah.

Taylor: They're all deceased and they're now – well, you probably saw that they're …

Q: I did see all the new construction, yeah.

Taylor: Yes, they're new construction.

Q: And do you remember if your mom had particular people who were her close friends in the community?

Taylor: Ah, yes. I know there was a lady whose name was Henrietta, Henrietta Green. She was, I think, her best friend. Others, some of the ladies who were the Moody family, Olive Moody,

May Moody, they were friends. I'm just trying to think of who else. But I think my mother was somebody who didn't really … she spent a lot of time at home. She worked and home was really where she spent most of her time. She wasn't one for visiting. But she was friendly, but she didn't really go to people's houses and spend a lot of time there. But she knew these people and was friendly with them.

Q: Okay. Can you describe kind of what the town or what the area looked like compared to what it looks like today?

Taylor: Mm-hmm. In its heyday, there were many more African American families than there are today. I think you can count the African American families that are there today on one hand. I know one on Clay Pit Road. I can think of one … on Crabtree right near the cemetery. There's another one – you've been to Bloomingdale Road.

Q: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Further down on Bloomingdale Road there is another African American family, that's three. Sharrotts Road, I don't know of any who live there and there were many there at that time. Bloomingdale Road was primarily African American. I don't think there are more than seven or eight African American families living in that area today.

Q: And what about the number of houses and how they were spread out? Were the roads paved?

Taylor: Paved? No. [Laughs] But many more houses than you see today. Now the church does own two small cottages, which are called the Baymen's Cottages and they were cottages that some of the early oystermen occupied when they came there and they're still there. We've had tenants in them. So those are two houses. There is an African American family next to that house that was built by another African American who owned a business in the area, Mr. Hunter. I don't know if that name is …?

Q: Is that George Hunter?

Taylor: George Hunter, yes.

Q: I read the article about him from the '50s that Joseph Mitchell wrote.

Taylor: Joseph Mitchell, "Mr. Hunter's Grave."

Q: Yes.

Taylor: Yes.

Q: Did you know George Hunter?

Taylor: Oh, yes.

Q: Can you tell me about him?

Taylor: Interesting man. First of all, when you spoke with him and he started speaking with you, you were fascinated by the fact that his voice was very soft, very harsh. I don't know if he had a damaged voice box or what. I'm beginning to feel that mine is. [Laughs] But he spoke almost in a whisper. But I think it had something to do with something physical in his voice. Nice man. Very generous. If he could help anyone, he did. Very generous to the church. He lived alone at the time. I think he was married twice and both of his wives had predeceased him. Loved to cook and was a very good cook. So on Saturday if you went to his house he was very busy preparing dinner for Sunday and was always willing to have anyone to come over and visit with him. He delighted in serving some of his home-cooked meals. And he also had a business. He was, um, oh, I don't know what they call them now, but he [chuckles] emptied the cesspools of the families who had bathrooms that were attached to a cesspool, and that was his business. There was a name for it, that wasn't the official name. But that was his business and, you know, to have a business at that time was really quite admirable.

Q: Did you ever eat –

Taylor: And he was very …

Q: Sorry. Did you ever eat any of his food?

Taylor: Occasionally he'd bring something to the church and we'd all enjoy it.

Q: And did you know his son?

Taylor: Yes, William. Yes. Mm-hmm. Didn't know him that well but yes, I remember him.

Q: Okay. And did you, um … I've lost my thought. Oh, can you tell me what was the land like where all those developments are now? Now there's just new construction everywhere on all sides.

Taylor: Right.

Q: Was that open land?

Taylor: Early – let me see, before the mass development there were some houses on that property. For example, on Bloomingdale Road opposite the church there were houses that were occupied by African Americans. Mr. Hunter, as I said, lived in that same row of houses and they had property around them. They weren't too close together. Helen Henry, she owned a house in that area, who was also African American. There were several houses there. None of them, as I said, attached to another. And gradually people as they got – the elders passed away, the children either decided to sell their house or one way or another property just changed hands and first thing you know there's mass development. I guess this happens in many communities and the communities change. For example, the house that I told you my aunt and uncle lived in next to the house that the family owned that was eventually sold. Like my cousin was a florist. He

had seven green houses. The property was very large and very deep and he had a flourishing business. And when he passed away, his son really wasn't interested in the business and eventually the property was sold and so now you see the attached houses that are there in that area.

Q: When was it sold?

Taylor: Maybe 25 years ago. I mean you sort of lose track of the exact time. I don't remember. But those houses haven't been there too long.

Q: I wanted to ask you about the church.

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Q: Can you tell me what it was like when you were a child and you were going to church?

Taylor: I loved waiting for Sunday to come because we had Sunday School in the morning and then you would see people that you probably hadn't seen all week. And then after Sunday School then we would have our morning services and occasionally we had a minister who lived nearby and was able to interact with the parishioners during the week. We had a parsonage, which was on Bloomingdale Road right where – I don't know if you noticed that they're building a school in the area.

Q: Yes.

Taylor: Yes. Okay, right adjacent to that there was a parsonage for the pastor. So he was there in the week and then you were able to – if you needed anything, he was available, and he was very active. Before what I'm talking about there were other members, pastors who came there and they also lived in the parsonage. There were special activities that occurred in the church each year. Around Christmas, you had what we called Jubilee where the children would recite poetry and they'd get candy for Christmas. I mean these were little things but as a child sometimes little things meant a lot. Today I'm not so sure that little things mean a lot to children. Things have changed dramatically. And the church was the one place that you congregated not only for religious services but for social activities. It was the one building in the community that really people looked forward to going to whatever the occasion would be.

Q: And obviously, your story in Sandy Ground starts with a pastor from the church. Was that important to you as a child, that your great grandmother's husband had been one of the pastors?

Taylor: Yeah, well, I really didn't even know about this as I was growing up. I had no idea that there was that relationship, because I never knew him, he died long before I was born and I think even long before my mother was born. So it makes me feel proud that the sixth pastor of the church was a member of this family but I wish I had known him.

Q: So are you still active in the church now?

Taylor: Yes, I am. I guess as long as you're close enough to the church to get there. I'm a member of the trustee board. [Phone ringing]

Q: So about the church, do you have a particular memory of something that was important to you at the church? Like was there a time when – like did you get married in the church?

Taylor: Oh, yes. [Laughs]

Q: Can you tell me about that?

Taylor: Yeah. [Laughs] I thought it was beautiful. You know, I – we were married in the church and I think we had a pretty large wedding as wedding goes. And because the people that you've grown up with and known for a life time adding to the people that you've met since you became an adult, so it was a good occasion.

Q: When did you get married?

Taylor: Ah, when did I get married, 1959.

Q: Nice. Did you have your daughter Baptized in the church?

Taylor: Yes. Mm-hmm. Yep.

Q: Did you have your husband's funeral there?

Taylor: Yes.

Q: I'm sorry.

Taylor: So it's, you know, an important part of your life and I think that in most small communities people find that the church is something that you go to for all kinds of occasions and these are memories that you just hold on to.

Q: And did you find that your fellow church members stood by you?

Taylor: Yes. I think it's been a very supportive community and I think people recognize the fact that we're really there for each other. And people who have gone through the same experiences, good or bad, are always willing to share those experiences with you and if you need aid or support they're there for you. So it's that type of community. Maybe not as much now as it was earlier, because many of the people who grew up in that area many of them have passed on and then many of their children have moved to other areas, not even on Staten Island, off of the island. So it's an entirely different kind of community today. I mean if you were to ask the young people today who are still in that area their recollections would be entirely different from mine.

Q: How many people are at a service usually now?

Taylor: Unfortunately, we're really looking for new members because most of the people don't live in the community any longer. You know it's one thing when you can walk to the church. Sometimes we look at old films that were taken and we see people coming out of the church and say, "Oh, golly, those were wonderful days," and walking down the street or up the street to their home. You don't see that anymore. Everybody who comes to the church has to drive there and some people have moved to areas where there is a church closer to them, and even if you have a car, you just feel if I can walk two blocks why am I going to drive half-an-hour to get to the church. So our church membership – well, church attendance I should say, has really suffered over the years. And it's not because we're not doing some of the same things that we had done all along. We have a wonderful pastor. She's really dedicated and spends a lot of time working on projects for the church; always there when you need her. But it takes more than that. It takes a commitment of people to say, "Well, this is my home church and so I'll still support it."

Q: Right. Right. So can you tell me a little – you were the president of the trustees and now you're on the board, is that right?

Taylor: I'm on the board. I'm a member. Mm-hmm.

Q: Okay. And what does it mean to be a trustee of the church?

Taylor: Well, we're responsible for – legally for things that happen in the church. If there is anything that requires a decision that is one of the legal nature the trustees are the ones who

make that. And they make major decisions for things that happen not necessarily legal but things that happen that would affect the church in terms of the purchases of things, having repairs done, work done in the church, anything that would really involve having other people to do something for the church and then decisions that have to be made.

Q: And do you go to service most weeks?

Taylor: Yes, every Sunday unless I'm sick. Yes. I play for one of the choirs, so that's three Sundays a week. I play the piano.

Q: Three Sundays a month.

Taylor: Did I say a week? [Laughs]

Q: Yeah. [Laughter]

Taylor: Yes, a month.

Q: Okay. Okay. So I wanted to ask you when did you leave Sandy Ground and what made you move out of the community?

Taylor: Well, after we got married we decided that, you know, it was time to be on my own, or I decided. We had an apartment on the other side of Staten Island. And then when our daughter

was born the apartment was very small and I don't know if I decided or I made the suggestion that since we had room at the house that I grew up in maybe we should go back there for a while, and my husband readily agreed, and we moved back. So we stayed there for three or four years and then we were thinking all the time about buying a house, so we were looking around and really hadn't found anything that we could agree on or that was the price that we could afford. And we met a realtor who said he would work with us and see what he could do, what he could find that he felt we could afford, and here we are. We built this house 50 years ago.

Q: And you moved from Sandy Ground here.

Taylor: From Sandy Ground here. Mm-hmm.

Q: Wow. And when you were raising your daughter and you were taking her to the A.M.E. Zion Church, right, so were you talking to her about Sandy Ground and telling her why it mattered?

Taylor: Oh, yeah. Right. Yes. She's well aware. She's schooled in the history of Sandy Ground. And today she lives in New Jersey and she's active in the Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church. She is the superintendent or the teacher of the Sunday School. She sings in the choir. Occasionally plays for the choir. So apparently, it was something that was strong enough in her background to make her want to make this trip over the bridge every Sunday or on other times when it's warranted to come to this church.

Q: That must make you proud.

Taylor: Absolutely. Yeah, she's a wonderful young lady.

Q: That's really nice.

Taylor: Not so young anymore, but. [Laughter] Very bright and very talented and a good girl.

Q: Lovely. Lovely. So were you in Sandy Ground when the fire happened in 1963?

Taylor: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, we were living in the Woodrow Road house and it was a horrible experience.

Q: Were you there that day?

Taylor: I was there that day.

Q: Can you tell me about it?

Taylor: Well, we knew that there were a lot of fires in the area and although none were really close to us. But if you know the proximity of Clay Pit Road and Bloomingdale Road in that area, we knew they were there and naturally on everybody's mind was how far will it spread? Will it get to our house? What do we do if we see it coming? Is there water to fight it? And then we heard that even the fire department couldn't fight it, there was no water. And occasionally

there would be a little bit of a spark flying from someplace and you run out with a broom and just beat, hoping that it would be able to stop it. It was a horrible day. And I know my husband had had a doctor's appointment that day so earlier, before things got bad, he had gone to the doctor and I was just like, "Oh, he should be home. I wish he'd get home." Eventually he did get home and Yvette, our daughter, she was small. It was just a very, very scary time, it was.

Q: When was Yvette born?

Taylor: Um, let me see, she was born 19 … let me see, when did I say I was married? [Laughs] Let me figure this out. She's 54 … so you do the math.

Q: Okay. So '59. Yeah, '61.

Taylor: Sixty-one. Yeah, I was born in – yeah, we were married in '59, she was born in '61.

Q: Okay. So you had a toddler and you were at home.

Taylor: Right.

Q: And was your mom home that day too?

Taylor: Yes, she was home. Yeah, we were all – because we were living in that house, so we were all there. You know feeling really hopeless and helpless. So it's something that I wouldn't

want anybody to have to go through again. And then, you know, some people lost their homes. We were very fortunate.

Q: Can you tell me about some of the families that lost their homes? Do you know what happened to them?

Taylor: Well, they relocated in other areas. I know the Bird family they lived on Clay Pit Road, they had to relocate. They moved the other side of the island, but then they did come back and rebuilt. And the Cooper family that lived next to them, they rebuilt their house also. Some of the families just move to other parts of Staten Island and never returned in terms of living there, but still coming back to the church for services, and they still do.

Q: Who was that?

Taylor: Well, the person who was the organist, Lois Mosley. I don't know if her name has come up.

Q: Yes. I've read her name, yes.

Taylor: Right. She lived in one of the houses on Bloomingdale Road and she and her family moved to Mariners Harbor. Her sister, Mary Cooper, she also moved to another area. I can't remember everyone's name but those people who were displaced, they had to find homes other

places and very few of them were able to rebuild. So that left a lot of vacant land, which the developers decided ripe for new development.

Q: That's what I wanted to ask you, what role did the fire play in the new development that came to Sandy Ground?

Taylor: Well, I think for some of the areas where the houses were burned, I guess developers realized that these people are not going to rebuild, some of the property I guess was sold to them and some of it was City property and they purchased that. And we could see that things were going to change because when you displace part of the population, and there's a lot of vacant land, a developer is going to eventually buy in and replacements are not going to look exactly like the ones who lost their homes.

Q: And in the '50s, had there not been that much change in the area?

Taylor: Not really. Before the fire, you could see that there was some change. You could see that many of the African American families that were there had moved because there wasn't any employment for them there. So they went places where there was more opportunities for employment. And also you recognize the fact that as those people left other people moved in who were not African American, which is fine. If we can all, you know, live side-by-side, that's ideal. But you could see that there was going to be a change, a large change, in the picture that was painted of the community prior to that. So if you look at things what happened after the fire was the reverse of what we saw when those oystermen first came there. And recently in our

church we just did a little skit about what the community looks like today and what has happened over the years and what will it look like in the future.

Q: Can you tell me about the skit?

Taylor: I have a copy. Well, it was just a little reading by each of – if you want me to read it.

Q: Well, can you describe it to me?

Taylor: Well, we talked about what the community – the first person was one of the children in the church and we asked her if she would talk about what the community would look like. And she said it started, you know, there weren't too many people here but the people who came there who were oystermen or farmers most of them were African American, and they came to a community that had several white families living in the community, but they welcomed them. And it was a community where people lived side-by-side and got along very well. And then you could see that the community – the next person talked about how the community grew. More African American people came into the community to live, found employment, and the church grew, and as the population grew people recognized the importance of having the church there. And then somebody else talked about the fact that it grew to the point that really the majority of the residents in the area were African American, which didn't mean that it meant white flight. But people who had lived there, many years many of them died and so their family members, you know, rather than move into the houses that their relatives had owned, they decided to sell. So the fact of the community just changed. And now as we look at it we're asking ourselves, at

what point with the face of the community change again and revert back to the way it was in those early days? And I can see that that has happened. When this happened, you could see that there's also a cycle in life and this is one example of how that cycle has played out … which makes it really very interesting.

Q: It does.

Taylor: And you can just be a fly on the wall and see what happens 50 years from now.

Q: Yeah. Did the Verrazano-Narrows opening in '64 and maybe the West Shore Expressway in '70 speed up development even more? Do you think they played a role?

Taylor: Possibly. That's quite possible because I'm sure a lot of the people who have moved onto Staten Island moved there because of the easy accessibility to various areas on the island, which they had to take ferries before. So I'm sure that that's one of the reasons. A lot of the residents who are newcomers of the island, by newcomers I mean since the bridge, did come from Brooklyn and they were looking for more space or whatever they were looking for, they found it on Staten Island.

Q: So what was the response of the African American community when the developers were coming in and all these new houses were being built? How did people respond to that?

Taylor: Not too favorably, because we could recognize what was going to happen. That the developers were going to take a lot of – there was a lot of vacant land, because a lot of people who had moved and for one reason, the houses were not rebuilt. And they knew that that was prime time for developers to come in and say, "This is what we're going to build." And then some of the people who had homes, for example those houses that were directly across the street from the church, those houses, some of them were sold and some of them people just decided well, I guess it's time to move. And that whole area where you see the row of houses there, they were houses that were occupied by African Americans prior to the fire and prior to things changing, and people wanting to maybe move to where there was more accessibility to transportation. Because people used to think, "Why do I have to walk a mile to get a bus or a mile to get a train where I could live in an area where I can walk to the corner and get that same transportation?" So, you know, I think as things changed and people recognized that there could be an easier way, some people just decided to move, and that's what happens.

Q: So when the African American families were starting to move out or had lost their homes to the fire and land was being sold, were you having conversations in the community about what was happening?

Taylor: Oh, I think, yeah, we were having conversations. Just casual conversations to each other without any thought of what can be done, you know, to change this flight of people. We knew that things were changing and we knew that the community would not be the same and what do we do?

Q: So when did that turn into an interest in preservation?

Taylor: When an article appeared in the Sunday News and the article was about the Sandy Ground community, which we knew about it, and we were proud of it, and we always loved it, but we didn't realize at that time, or at least I didn't, how much this community meant in terms of the history of the whole city and probably even a larger area. And as we read this – I know I always use my husband and I as examples, but I'm sure this happened in other households when they opened the paper on Sunday and saw this – we said to each other, "You know, this is something we really ought to investigate." If there is enough interest that this makes the cover of the colored section of the paper, then maybe there is something that we really ought to be more interested in. We couldn't wait for Monday morning. My husband called the New York Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, talking about this article to find out what they knew. And we were amazed that they were really very interested in this community. So that sort of gave us the idea that well, if they're interested, we better be interested too so we can be on the ground floor with this.

So we talked about this at – the next Sunday at church. We mentioned this to some of the members and to our pastor and he said, "Well, you know, I'm going to form a committee and I want this committee to do some investigating to find out just where this interest came from, what it means, and how we can be involved. This is our community," which is what happened.

Q: Who was the pastor?

Taylor: Reverend Ellis Freeman. He lived in New Jersey, as many of our pastors do because we belong to a New Jersey conference connection. He was very active in the church, not only on Sunday morning, but whenever anything was going on that he could be involved in, he was there. And he formed the committee and the rest is history. We sat down and talked about it and we were so excited that this is something we're going to really be on the ground floor to see that we get some recognition, because we know what the community means to us, but apparently this means something to the state.

Q: So tell me about that history, were you on the committee?

Taylor: Oh, absolutely.

Q: And what was the – how did you meet and what did you talk about and what did you do?

Taylor: Well, initially, the first meetings were just those people that he appointed and we sat down and just talked about this article that we had read and we didn't realize that other people were really that interested in it, outside of those of us who lived in the community and grew up there. And we felt that if they're interested in it and they're part of the historic preservation movement, then we need to be involved. So we decided we're going to form an organization and really address this in the way that it should be addressed. And so we came across a name, why not the Sandy Ground Historical Society, because that's what we're all about, and I think we all agreed. And we need officers, and so we elected officers and I was fortunate enough to be

elected the president at the time. And I have information, I can show you who the initial officers were.

Q: And how did you know how to form an organization?

Taylor: We inquired of other people who had been parts of organizations and we did a lot of research. We were really just so excited about this that we felt, you know, this is something that we're going to follow and we're going to be involved from the ground floor up and we're going to make sure that we get the recognition that this community really deserves. So I don't remember exactly who we connected with initially, but we did talk to the borough president about it to let him know what we were interested in. We did seek the advice of some people who were interested in historic preservation. We talked to people from the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences, Gail Schneider. I don't know if her name has come up in your travels. She was very, very interested. She worked at the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences and she gave us some leads. She recognized the importance of this community. And we met a lot of people who had some experience working with city agencies or government agencies, and we talked to an attorney. And we got leads and with our own ingenuity we knew that this is something that we're really going to pursue and we're going to do it the way that it needs to be done, so everything will be done legally and we'll be able to just move on and get some recognition for the area.

Q: So what was in the article? Was it about – what was in the article?

Taylor: Well, it told about some of the families that lived there. It told about how this community had started. I have a copy someplace and I'll try to look it up. But it told about the fact that it was historical because of the people who came here many, many years ago and how they thrived. They didn't wait for other people to do things for them, that their ingenuity was something to be admired, that the cohesiveness of the community was important. He really highlighted all the things that make a community worth really following up on, looking into, living in it and preserving the history. I think that's one of the things that we were really focused on, preserving the history of the area.

Q: And so do you remember who else was involved? And were people motivated in part by wanting to have there be less development or was development not so much the issue?

Taylor: Oh, development was a major part of the issue because we could see that the community was changing, dramatically. And one of the things we thought we might be able to do was to stop some of this development. And apparently the developers had a head start on us so therefore that wasn't going to happen. But we thought well if we can't change – can't preserve the community physically as it is, we can at least preserve the history, and you can't take that away from us.

So we put our focus on that's why we do the historical society, the history is important and we're going to make sure that we disseminate this information so other people know how important the history is. They might drive through the community and not see the African American presence that we grew up with, but they'll know that there is history there. And so, um … yeah. Some of

them, well, Sylvia D'Alessandro, she was one of the original members of the group and her daughter, Julie Lewis Moody. I can give you a list of people who were the original members.

Q: And were they people who you had been friends with some of them since childhood?

Taylor: Right. Yeah. Some of them I grew up with and were friendly with them from childhood: Wanda Butler, Denise Pedro, Ray Hagerman, who happened to be a Caucasian man who lived in the community but was interested in preservation also, Lucille Herring, my husband, Elmore Taylor, Ralph Cooper, Lucilla Carson, Elmira John, and Reverend Ellis Freeman, they were the founding committee members, and that was before we got the designation as a historical society.

Q: So I read that there was an archeological survey in the '70s.

Taylor: Yes. Right.

Q: Were you part of the push for that to happen?

Taylor: This is all from – yes, because when we contacted the State to find out just what do we do to make sure that this history is preserved, they told us one of the things they would suggest was that we should have an archeological survey done. And we asked them how to go about it and we hired an archeological team. And they did a complete surface survey of the entire community, which was really a very fascinating time because they were there every day, except

on the weekends, and they really did a dig, they did an archeological dig. And then we had to get a lot of the history from the community and one of the elder members, William Pop Pedro, who was Sylvia's grandfather, he had a very good memory even though he was in his 90s. And he used to talk about what he remembered in the community and that was really valuable information that was used. And after the dig was completed, cases, boxes of artifacts were unearthed and lots of valuable information was recorded, two volumes of information.

Q: Wow!

Taylor: And all of this was submitted to the State and they were really very pleased with the work that had been done. And we are now listed on both State and the National Registers of Historic Places.

Q: That's terrific.

Taylor: That's a condensed version of what happened over the years. [Laughs]

Q: That's terrific. And where did you get the resources to pay for the archeological survey?

Taylor: Through the State. The archeological dig was done through funds that the State provided, because we had no resources. We did do some things that were fundraisers but we certainly couldn't raise enough funds to take care of the cost of doing that. There was a whole team of archeologists who were there every day.

Q: Do you know where all that material that was gathered is stored now?

Taylor: I know it was at the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences.

Q: So it's probably there.

Taylor: Probably.

Q: Okay. And was it at the same time that the archeological survey was happening that you formally founded the historical society?

Taylor: Yes. It was around that same time because we recognized the fact that we needed to have an organization that had a formal title, and so we decided that we're going to make this a historical society and went about doing that.

Q: And how did you become the first president?

Taylor: I was elected by the group. [Laughs]

Q: How did that feel?

Taylor: Great. I felt it was really quite an honor. But I have often said I have never worked for any cause, the time that I spent and the energy I devoted to making sure we got off the ground and we made ourselves known and recognized – others to recognize the importance of this community.

Q: So can you describe some of that work to me and when did you do it and how did you do it?

Taylor: 24/7.

Q: Did you also have a daytime paying job?

Taylor: Yeah, I was a teacher.

Q: Nice!

Taylor: Yeah.

Q: What did you teach?

Taylor: I taught elementary school, primarily kindergarten.

Q: On Staten Island?

Taylor: On Staten Island, yes.

Q: So then at night and on weekends you worked for the historical preservation?

Taylor: Yeah. And I had a husband who was very supportive, because he was as interested in making sure this worked as I was, so that made a big difference, you know, if you're working together. And we all worked. Everybody who became a member of this board was willing to contribute whatever they could to make sure that this message got across to everybody and people recognized the importance of this community.

Q: So what kinds of things did it take? What did you have to do to get off the ground?

Taylor: Well, we had to do some more research ourselves in the community. A lot of interviews were conducted. Julie Moody was one of those people. She is Sylvia's daughter.

Q: I've seen her name, yes.

Taylor: She worked with her grandfather, who was William Pedro, in getting a lot of the oral history, because he was able to remember things that most of us had just heard in passing but he could give more details. And then other members of the community who were elderly had some recollections of things that had happened earlier and all this information was important in trying to compile enough that the State would feel we have enough history to really consider this as a

historical site. So we just worked on that. We worked on whatever they felt we needed to do to be able to get this designation.

Q: So I know one of the early things that you did was get the cemetery landmarked.

Taylor: Right.

Q: Can you tell me about that?

Taylor: Well, we knew that the City did landmark certain areas, certain sites, and we felt that since the cemetery was the burial place for many of the early residents of that area that that should be the first place that we considered having landmarked. So we did go to the public hearing. We spoke in favor of landmarking. Several of the members attended, and apparently whatever was said was enough to make them really considerate it. They did their research and decided this area is definitely worthy of consideration at least for landmarking and then when the vote came, they voted in favor of landmarking that based on its historical value to the community.

Q: Do you remember what it felt like when you got that?

Taylor: Wonderful. I mean we felt that this was, first of all, important for the community, a feather in the cap of the Historical Society and something that nobody could take away from us;

it's there. And people will recognize the fact that here lie many of the people who helped to found this community.

Q: Do you still go there sometimes?

Taylor: Oh, yeah. As a matter of fact, my mother's birthday was on Monday and I went to take flowers there on Monday. So, yep. I go there every Memorial Day to put flowers on it because I have a lot of family members buried there. And then just sometimes just stop in, walk around. You probably know that they've done some research recently in the cemetery.

Q: Mm-hmm. Can you talk about that a little?

Taylor: Well, I don't know too much about it but I am on that committee, too. We have hired somebody – well, we've gotten a grant, which was really very, very fortunate, for the survey to be done. There is equipment that can be used to identify where people are buried, not who, but where, because a lot of people are buried and there are no tombstones or any other markers to identify the graves. And if you know anything about this area, the grass grows and it grows over and the mounds get leveled off and the first thing you know, you can't identify that there is a grave there. This equipment that they're using is able to identify that there is a burial. We'll never know exactly who was buried there. But at least we'll know where not to bury people and it will help us in mapping out the cemetery, because right now we don't have an accurate record of where everyone is buried. So this is just to let us know someone is buried in these spots, is important.

Q: Right. Do you know who the grant is from?

Taylor: Well, it's partly from the … huh, let me see. It's all in connection with the City, with landmarks, Landmarks Preservation Commission and another agency and I can get that information for you.

Q: Okay. So then I wanted to ask you I know that it's only been, I think in 2011, that your house and the cottages and the church itself were landmarked.

Taylor: Right.

Q: Can you tell me about that? How did you accomplish that and what made you want to do it?

Taylor: Well, I felt that it's one way of preserving a part of the community, which otherwise may not still be there 50 years from now. And I felt that these houses were significant. I mean the baymen they were people who came there early in settling that community and there are only two houses left. There were originally three. There was one way in the rear of it, which is no longer there. But it was one way of saying that this is a part of what was an early community. And I know the house that belonged to my family was one that I felt that if it was purchased in the middle 1860s, I think it's worthy of designation as a landmark. And the church also was something that we felt this is something that you can't take away from us if we have this designation.

Q: And what did you have to do to get the designation?

Taylor: Well, first of all, you have to convince the Landmark Commission that it's worth their coming out to look at. And they did come out and even the chairperson came out and looked. They're looking for certain things. For example, the house that my family owns, the exterior has been changed, I mean it's no longer the clapboard that it was initially, but with time things do change, and they recognized this. But they felt that it hadn't changed that much in character and the history of the house was really important. And based on those facts, they presented the case and it was approved.

Q: That's tremendous.

Taylor: Yes, it really is. It's something that we're proud of. And it belongs to members of the family, I'm not the only owner, because the descendants of the original owners own that piece of property.

Q: So who in addition to you is that?

Taylor: I have cousins. It's mostly cousins. I think I'm the oldest of those who are owners now.

Q: And as a landmarked property it means it can't be changed, is that right?

Taylor: The exterior cannot be changed without permission from the Commission. So if you have anything that needs to be done on the exterior, you have to get permission. And if they feel it's going to alter the appearance of the structure, then they won't grant the permission. I mean some minor repairs and things of that nature you have to do those things if something comes up in an emergency. But basically, you have to get permission from them because they are the overseers of that property in a way.

Q: Sylvia told me that a way to recognize an original house was by the size of the lot because the original homes have so much more land around them than the new houses are either attached or just so close to each other.

Taylor: Mm-hmm. That's true.

Q: Which I thought was interesting and then I could see it. I was like, "Oh, right, that was a big piece of land."

Taylor: Yeah, and it was much larger. It was much deeper.

Q: Okay.

Taylor: But it was a lot of property and you're paying taxes on a lot of property that's not being used and then the developer who built on the opposite side of the house, not on the side going up to the Sandy Ground house but the other side, he asked us if we would be interested in selling

part of the rear portion. And we talked about it and we felt that if we keep enough for a large rear yard, which we did, the rest of it we could sell. And so we did sell some of that because it went back quite deep.

Q: And when was that roughly?

Taylor: Hmm, 10 years ago. Fifteen years, time sort of blends.

Q: Okay. When did the Historical Society get the house that it's in?

Taylor: Ah, let's see, it must be about – I don't want to quote a date but I'm sure it's … about 20 years maybe, at least.

Q: And is that an original house as well?

Taylor: It's an original house. Well, original in my mind because I remember as a child that that house was there. So it is one of the older houses.

Q: Okay. Can you tell me about the Historical Society's work, sort of how its work has changed over time and what it's up to now?

Taylor: Well, I think initially we were interested in what we can do to preserve anything that's physical that is reminiscent of the older days. And that's why I think that that interest now is no

longer primary. I think we're more interested in preserving the history, disseminating that information. And by really sharing it with the youngsters and therefore we are focusing a lot on children. That's one of the things that Sylvia has been very, very good in doing, working with the schools and bringing school children out to teach them a little bit about the history, which they would never know. I am sure many of the children who have attended those sessions there have never been beyond the North Shore of Staten Island and don't even know that there is another part of Staten Island that is something that is really historical. Many of the African American children who come really had no idea that this part of the island existed, and I think it's important for them to know that history.

Q: And I think that arts is a big part of the work as well, is that right?

Taylor: Yes. Mm-hmm.

Q: What form does that take?

Taylor: Well, when they come out they have different kinds of activities for them and they make something that will show them the history, will show them something that they will be able to take with them to show others and history spreads that way, too, through pieces of artwork that you've done. There's a coloring book that some of them get, which will tell them a little bit about the history and other areas. And bringing them into the building and showing them things that are there that visually they can remember and associate with the history of the community, you know, those things are important for children.

Q: And I think there's also quilting.

Taylor: Yes.

Q: Can you tell me about that?

Taylor: I've attended some of the quilting classes. Sewing is not my forte. My mother sewed and I never went to a store to buy a dress or a coat or anything. My mother made all of my clothes and I was very proud to wear them because she was an excellent seamstress. I was never interested in sewing. But my friend said, "Well, come on, come with me," and I went to the quilting class and I really enjoyed it. As a matter of fact, I made a quilt that had images of the seven generations of my family, and I'm really very proud of that.

Q: Where is that?

Taylor: I loaned it to somebody because they wanted to share it with somebody else. I haven't gotten it back yet but I've go to. This is teaching me, you don't loan, let them come here and see it.

Q: Yeah.

Taylor: Yeah. Well, this is quite recently so I have time to still get it back.

Q: I bet its fabulous though.

Taylor: I think it is because each – I'll show you images of the family that I have here before you go and each one is a picture of seven generations – to have a picture of seven generations I think is something to be very proud of.

Q: It is, absolutely.

Taylor: Mm-hmm. And one of the women who works with us who is a quilter, she has done such a marvelous job in working with us, because I said sewing and quilting is not my forte, but she made it enjoyable. The end product is something that you're proud of.

Q: And are most of the people who participate in the quilting members of the Sandy Ground community?

Taylor: No. Some of them are but not necessarily. But the word has spread throughout Staten Island that this is something that you might enjoy doing and so people come. It was something that you don't have to have been a part of the Sandy Ground community to do something that requires just a little bit of ingenuity and share your own history. You don't have to be a Sandy Grounder to have a history.

Q: Of course. So I wanted to ask you, when you think about Sandy Ground now, what comes to mind?

Q: If I compare it with what I've known, it's kind of a sad time. Not that I don't feel that progress is important any place. But I think that we've lost a presence that was always very important. I recognize the fact that this is life nothing stays the same. And I think that that's why it's so important that we have preserved this history in some form and did not let it just go by the wayside. So people will still know that there was a community here and even though it may not look the same, it was a very important part of the growth of Staten Island and something we should be proud of.

Taylor: Absolutely. And what do you see as the future for Sandy Ground?

Q: Well, if it stays on the same trajectory that it's on now, it will not have much of an African American presence. As I said, the membership of the church is not as much as we feel you would need to sustain a church but we have no intentions of closing the doors of the church. We keep hoping that there will be a resurgence and the people will still come back to the community, because most of the people who attend no longer live within that area. Some come from New Jersey and other parts of Staten Island. So I don't see where things are going to change too much. I think that the membership of the community now most of them are not African Americans nor do they feel any connection to that church. So, you know, time will tell but I cannot see things changing dramatically unless people from outside of the community come back to worship there.

Q: And what do you think the future is of your house?

Taylor: Ah, it's a good question. I'm really the one who now is most interested in holding onto the house and doing whatever I can. We are currently renting the house. But most of the other family members live in different parts of the state, the country or even different parts of Staten Island and really aren't that involved. But as long as I'm around I don't intend to have it slip out of the hands of the family. And the fact that it is a landmark I think will help with in any respect to keep that house there as long as possible. So here's hoping.

Q: Okay. So do you have lessons you've learned from your work in historic preservation, founding the Historical Society or getting recognition as a historic place or landmarking your house and the church and the cottages that you would want to share with other New Yorkers who want to preserve their history in the city?

Taylor: Well, I think the major lesson is the fact that if you feel that your piece of property is worthy of this kind of designation, or at least recognition, do whatever you can to pursue it. Don't give up because the road might be bumpy at times but it's worth it. A piece of property is only a piece of property if you're going to take care of it. And if you don't preserve at least the physical surroundings, you can preserve the history, and I think that's what we've done in many cases because there are no longer the same houses that were there initially, but you can't take away the history. And there is some way that you can let this be passed down from generation to generation. And I think that's what many of the members of the community are doing. They're

letting their children and their grandchildren know: This is a place that is important in the history of this country, don't ever forget it.

Q: Yeah. And are there places where you can tell me like turn here for advice or for resources?

Taylor: Well, as I said the State Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation they were very helpful, because they obviously are working there because they have an interest in this and they were able to give us a lot of leads. But I think sometimes elected officials can be helpful and sometimes you get not only help from them but you get monetary help if there are things that they can contribute to really trying to preserve things. And I think you have to get in touch with other historical societies because each one has a different road that they took but sharing their experiences sometimes makes it easier for you because you'll get some leads and people that you can talk with or agencies that you can consult. Because we learned a lot just by talking with other people who had some more experiences. So I would say go for it.

Q: Okay. Have you given any thought to archiving your own papers and mementos and the records that you have?

Taylor: Well, I have, yeah, I've given it a lot of thought. But now it means doing a lot of work to do it. I feel it's so important to keep records and I do have some things that I've put in certain order and put away. As I said, I know a lot about my family history because of letters that were written by my ancestors and they were kept. My grandmother, obviously, knew how important it

was if she would record her travels and give us something to recognize that she was interested enough to search her roots, to leave her family and to ….

Q: And to go south.

Taylor: … to go south. This was something, I mean, I don't remember the date on her papers but it was done many years ago.

Q: That was daring.

Taylor: That was daring, it really was. And I think if people had that attitude, they would really be able to save a lot of history that otherwise would be lost. Just talking about it and not passing it on in some way is not enough. You have to have something concrete because stories are wonderful if they're passed on. But somewhere along the line those stories, you know, get lost, people die and stories die with them. Write it down.

Q: Yeah. And archive it somehow.

Taylor: Absolutely.

Q: Okay. So before we say good-bye, is there anything I didn't think to ask or something that's come to mind that you want to share since we're recording, since we're making our own history here, about Sandy Ground or your family, anything that you want to share?

Taylor: Um, I really can't think of anything specifically because I think I've covered so much, maybe not enough, but the things that really are important in my life. But I would urge anyone, we all have a history and sometimes we don't recognize how important that is because we're living it each day. But in some way record your history, pass it down to your children, let them know the value of it and don't ever think that anything that seems so insignificant really is because everything is important that we do in life, and if you don't pass it down, no one else will ever know. Pass it on.

Q: Thank you so much, Yvonne.

Taylor: Oh, it was my pleasure.

Q: It was just lovely to talk with you.

[End of interview]