



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK  
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

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**Interview with Lane Parsons**

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*Nancy Metzger interviewed long-time residents of Capitol Hill while she was chair of the Historic Preservation Committee of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society. She graciously offered to allow this and other interviews to be incorporated into the Overbeck Project collection. Any use of this material should credit the Ruth Ann Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project website for making it available.*

*[Addresses in this transcript are in Southeast Washington, DC, unless otherwise noted.]*

TAPE 1, SIDE 1

**METZGER:** This is Monday afternoon, September 28, [2008] and I am here at 2804 Hunter Road in Fairfax, Virginia with Mr. Lane Parsons, who grew up in the Barney Circle area of Capitol Hill. My name is Nancy Metzger and we're going to start talking now. How long did your family live—or what was the address? I have it as ...

**PARSONS:** 1616 G Street SE.

**METZGER:** Okay. Do you know when your parents moved there?

**PARSONS:** Well, I was born in 1923, and they were already there then.

**METZGER:** They were there. That was the only home you knew?

**PARSONS:** Yes.

**METZGER:** I know those houses were built in 1907.

**PARSONS:** 1907? That's probably when they moved in.

**METZGER:** Are you the youngest of the children?

**PARSONS:** I have one sister older than I am, six years older.

**METZGER:** Six years ... so they were probably there then too. That would have taken them down to 1917. So they may have been the second family but could have been the first.

**PARSONS:** I think they were probably the first.

**METZGER:** And how long did they stay at the house? When did they move from there?

**PARSONS:** Well, in 1946 my father died, and I was in the Navy at the time. My sister and mother were still living there. I take that back. My sister had moved to Branch Avenue SE.

**METZGER:** Across the river ...

**PARSONS:** So, let's see, I left in '46 too, when I came back from the Navy. So my time at 1616 G Street would be from birth to 1946.

**METZGER:** That was a good long time. You saw it ... And then your mom stayed alone or did she move ...

**PARSONS:** She stayed in the house for a while, but then she sold the house and moved in with my sister.

**METZGER:** Okay. So that was a long time.

**PARSONS:** When I came back from the Navy, I also moved across the river.

**METZGER:** To what area?

**PARSONS:** Massachusetts Avenue, Fort Dupont area.

**METZGER:** Oh, okay. Sure. Let's see ... did your parents ever say why they moved there?

**PARSONS:** Well, after my father died, my mother was just there by herself, more or less. She moved in with my sister so they could sell the house.

**METZGER:** But why they moved to the G Street house, when they moved there. Did they ever say why they choose that area?

**PARSONS:** When they got married, I guess they just bought the house.

**METZGER:** Did they grow up on Capitol Hill?

**PARSONS:** No, my father was from Michigan; my mother was from Virginia here.

**METZGER:** Oh. Where did they meet?

**PARSONS:** Ummm ... I'm not sure. [Laughing.] I wasn't there.

**METZGER:** [Laughing.] They never told you, right. Do you remember since houses were still being built ... probably the last houses in that area—and we're talking about 17<sup>th</sup> Street, Kentucky Avenue and up to Potomac, that triangle ...

**PARSONS:** The only houses I remember being built in that area would be 1623–31 G Street, about five houses there.

**METZGER:** Yes, that was at the end. You would have been about five or six when those were built, so it was a fun project to watch?

**PARSONS:** Yeah, it was interesting because they didn't have bulldozers and all to dig out basements. At that time they had horse-drawn plows ...

**METZGER:** Oh really?

**PARSONS:** That dug up the ground, and then they moved the dirt by hand.

**METZGER:** So it was like a big bucket brigade or wheelbarrows ... ?

**PARSONS:** I don't remember a lot of the details except that horses pulling the plows to dig up the dirt instead of bulldozers.

**METZGER:** Oh, wow. I never thought of that before, how they did that. Very interesting.

**PARSONS:** And one time, when they were surfacing G Street, they had a big steam engine roller, puffing steam and rolling.

**METZGER:** Making a wonderful smell of hot asphalt, right.

**PARSONS:** But that was a steam engine then.

**METZGER:** Right, well, I think actually something I read said 17<sup>th</sup> Street wasn't actually paved until the late 20s.

**PARSONS:** Hmmm ... I can't remember that being paved.

**METZGER:** But you've always remembered as being paved. Where did you go to school?

**PARSONS:** My elementary school was Buchanan, which was between 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Street on E Street. For junior high, I went to Hine Junior High.

**METZGER:** ... which is down by Eastern Market.

**PARSONS:** And for high school, I went to Eastern High.

**METZGER:** And graduated in what year?

**PARSONS:** I left school in 1941 to go to work at the Navy Yard.

**METZGER:** Oh, really!

**PARSONS:** I started out as an apprentice machinist, then I finally got my machinist rating there.

**METZGER:** Okay, we see that term a lot, "machinist," and I'm not sure, for instance, that I know exactly what a machinist—what all that encompasses.

**PARSONS:** Well, what I did was run different types of machines, cutting metal. The Navy Yard was a naval gun factory. They made big guns for the navy. And it required lathe work and milling machines, and drill presses, operating that type of equipment.

**METZGER:** So had you had experience in that before?

**PARSONS:** No, I started out as an apprentice learning on the job.

**METZGER:** But after you graduated. They didn't hire on summer workers or anything like that.

[Phone rings, and recording is stopped.]

**PARSONS:** It was a four-year course. We hadn't gotten into World War II yet, but we were preparing for it.

**METZGER:** That's right, you would have graduated in June of '41.

**PARSONS:** Actually, I didn't complete my last year. Everybody was getting into the war work at that time, and I figured that I could help out that way. So, I went through my apprenticeship in less than four years because we were working seven days a week.

**METZGER:** Oh, so you got in a lot of hours. Was it really noisy? What were the conditions?

**PARSONS:** The Navy Yard consisted of quite a few different shops, and I was in the optical shop, which wasn't noisy.

**METZGER:** So you were doing the sights and the scopes and the ...

**PARSONS:** Periscopes, telescopes, and things like that.

**METZGER:** Did you find it really interesting?

**PARSONS:** Yes, it was interesting, nice job. Actually I took a civil service test for both jobs—Government Printing Office, Navy Yard machinist. This came through first, so I took that.

**METZGER:** And you could see a real relationship to getting ready for the war that everyone knew was most likely coming ...

**PARSONS:** Right. We were helping England quite a bit with their war effort.

**METZGER:** Right. So how did you get to work? Did you go down to the trolley?

**PARSONS:** Walk or bus.

**METZGER:** You didn't use the trolley?

**PARSONS:** Trolley didn't go ... If I took the trolley, I'd have to go up to Eighth and Pennsylvania Avenue and get a Navy Yard bus.

**METZGER:** Oh, couldn't you transfer at Eighth and Penn?

**PARSONS:** That's what I said, I mean the streetcar went down Eighth Street to the Navy Yard. I would have to go out of the way and then come back in. Walking is direct. I had a car later on too.

**METZGER:** Okay. What shift did you ... or did they change? Were they working around the clock?

**PARSONS:** Yes, around the clock. I did work some ... they had three shifts: 8 to 4:30; 4 to 12 and 12 to 8. I worked various shifts but mainly the midnight shift, 12 to 8.

**METZGER:** So then you came home and ...

**PARSONS:** Slept or did what I wanted. I'd get some sleep in between but I had a choice of sleeping early or late.

**METZGER:** Did they have cafeterias in the Navy Yard? I've seen pictures of men with lunchboxes.

**PARSONS:** Yes, but they weren't open for the midnight shift, just the day shift.

**METZGER:** So you did take your lunch? And a thermos of coffee or something to drink, of course, and then it was hard to go to sleep right away.

**PARSONS:** I stayed at the Navy Yard until 1944, and then I went in the Navy.

**METZGER:** Oh, really? Were you drafted or just decided?

**PARSONS:** I wasn't drafted, but earlier, when I tried to get in ... in fact, I was drafted once before, but I finally got in and got all the way up to the draft board, and they looked at my records and saw I worked at the Navy Yard and said I was valuable there so I had to wait a little while longer. Actually, I was drafted twice and accepted once. [Laughing.]

**METZGER:** And when you went into the Navy, what did you do in the Navy?

**PARSONS:** I went to Williamsburg, Virginia for boot camp. And then after boot camp, I was transferred to a naval ship—I forget the term, but they were forming crews for different ships that were being launched. I was destined to be on the USS Pittsburgh, which was a heavy cruiser. It was being built at the time I was in Rhode Island, waiting for it to be put in. We learned quite a bit about the Navy and Navy

practices. It was sort of like a second boot camp. We kept on learning—how to put out fires on ships, names of ships and all. That's where I met my wife. I went on liberty up in Boston and met my wife at a roller skating rink. That's my first wife. I got married a second time now.

**METZGER:** So she was from Boston?

**PARSONS:** Boston area. When the ship was commissioned, I went on board the ship and we had our shake-down cruise, got the ship ready to be sent out to the Pacific. After all of that, we went through the Panama Canal, out to Hawaii and then on out to the Task Force. We got out there in time to be in the Iwo Jima campaign and Okinawa. After Okinawa campaign, we had a typhoon. It took 104 feet off our bow.

**METZGER:** Oh, my gosh.

**PARSONS:** So we had to come back for repairs.

**METZGER:** I guess so. One-hundred four feet seems like a lot ...

**PARSONS:** The ship was about 570 feet long.

**METZGER:** So it was like in compartments so you could ... ?

**PARSONS:** It was in compartments, but we didn't have a bow. We got back to Bremerton, Washington, and I was transferred to another ship, an LSD-5 [Landing Ship, Dock -5] called the Gunston Hall. It was a landing craft, where they had these small personnel boats and all that took the marines and all ashore. We were repairing them, carrying them, staffing them. It was quite interesting. The ship sinks down and the little boats come in to the lower deck, pump it out, and then work on the boats and all.

**METZGER:** So did your machinist's training come in handy there?

**PARSONS:** Actually, it didn't. I was a storekeeper. Actually, when I first started in the Navy I was what they called a striker—a gunner's mate. I was assigned to a gun turret division. But later on I transferred to storekeeping, in which we provided all the necessities for the ship—food, clothing and everything, pay. After being on the LSD for a while, going up and down the coast, getting all these little boats from the shore installations and bringing them back to Long Beach, California, it was time for me to be discharged from the Navy. So I came back to Washington. That's where I started my civilian life again. I came back to my house on G Street for a couple of months until I could get an apartment.

**METZGER:** I can imagine that housing was tight at that point. It was still so packed and people were coming back.

**PARSONS:** So that's my life ...

**METZGER:** [Laughing.] In a nutshell, at least the first 20-some years of it. So getting back to Buchanan School. Did you walk to Buchanan?

**PARSONS:** I walked to all my schools. There weren't any buses.

**METZGER:** Were there a lot of children in Barney Circle at that time? Did you have a lot of playmates?

**PARSONS:** I didn't know so many kids on H Street or Kentucky Avenue. There must have been. But on G Street we had maybe 20 kids, I guess, who played together.

**METZGER:** That's a good number. So you really stayed with your G Street crowd ... and your mom knew everybody and everybody knew you. When you went to Hine ... that was actually old Eastern High School that they re-named. It's not the one that's there now.

**PARSONS:** There was another school on that same block. I don't remember the name ...

**METZGER:** Wallach School. Now there were other schools ... but I guess Buchanan was closer. There was Cranch School at 12<sup>th</sup> and G on the other [south] side of Pennsylvania Avenue.

**PARSONS:** I remember a school at 12<sup>th</sup> and G. Actually, I don't think that would have been any closer. I used to go up G Street to Kentucky Avenue, Kentucky Avenue to E and then down to Buchanan.

**METZGER:** Do you remember any of your favorite teachers? Or, did you like school there?

**PARSONS:** I can remember a couple of my teachers. There was a Mrs. Ferringer in the third grade and Mrs. Elliot in the fifth grade. I can't remember why I remember those two. The principal's name was Mrs. Dooley.

**METZGER:** Did any of them live in the neighborhood?

**PARSONS:** Not that I know of.

**METZGER:** Did most of the kids from G Street go to the same schools? Did anyone go to the Catholic school?

**PARSONS:** I can't recall anybody going to the Catholic School. There was Holy Comforter School at 15<sup>th</sup> and East Capitol, I think.

**METZGER:** Where did your father work?



**PARSONS:** He worked for the Post Office Department at 12<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania Avenue [NW].

**METZGER:** Northwest? Downtown?

**PARSONS:** He was Assistant Supervisor for the Registered Mails Division. He was second highest in the Registered Mails Division.

**METZGER:** Had he gone to college?

**PARSONS:** He graduated from law school at GW [George Washington University]. Actually, he [had] his law practice in the Post Office.

**METZGER:** What was his name?

**PARSONS:** George. George W.

**METZGER:** George W. Parsons. And your mom ... did she work outside the home?

**PARSONS:** No. She was deaf.

**METZGER:** She was deaf. Was that from birth?

**PARSONS:** No. I don't think from birth but when she was a child, I guess.

**METZGER:** Did you communicate with her by ...

**PARSONS:** She had what she called a speaking tube. It was a flexible cable covered with cloth. It had a speaker at one end and an ear piece at the other. She stuck it in her ear and you talked into the other. Or else we'd write notes to each other.

**METZGER:** Did she go to Gallaudet at all?

**PARSONS:** No. I think she was past that age. She did take some lip reading lessons, though. Some woman up on Connecticut Avenue NW, she used to go to try and learn lip reading. She never really got around to mastering it.

**METZGER:** That's one of the things you grow up with so it doesn't seem unusual. It's just the way your family is.

**PARSONS:** At that time, women weren't working anyway.

**METZGER:** A lot of women were at home, so there was a neighborhood there. Since the porches on that row are one of the wonderful things—I mean, they weren't sitting out there, twiddling their thumbs—but was that a place where they met and talked?

**PARSONS:** People sat out on their porches and talked to their neighbors. A very neighborly neighborhood. Most everybody knew all the neighbors in the neighborhood. There was one lady—1620 G Street—named Mrs. Cissy, I don't know what her first name was—but she sort of looked out after all the kids in the neighborhood and make sure they were all straight and everything.

**METZGER:** Did she have children at that time?

**PARSONS:** Later on she had a younger one, but she seemed to take charge of all the kids in the neighborhood and make sure they weren't getting into trouble.

**METZGER:** Okay, if someone got into trouble, what kind of trouble would they typically get into?

**PARSONS:** Oh, maybe, somebody hauling a football and hit a car or something. We used to play football in the street.

**METZGER:** So you played in the street. Was there very much traffic going through there?

**PARSONS:** Not too much. It dead ends up at 17<sup>th</sup> Street there.

**METZGER:** So it was sort of like a cul-de-sac almost. Which made it great ... were there a lot of cars at the time?

**PARSONS:** Well, most families had a car parked on the street. There was a few of them had garages, but mostly street parking. You took a chance finding a parking spot on the street.

**METZGER:** I guess the cars were shorter at the time. If everybody had one car ...

**PARSONS:** I think they might have been bigger.

**METZGER:** I guess you're right, once you got past the model Ts they were getting longer. Did your father take the bus downtown?

**PARSONS:** He took the streetcar, yes.

**METZGER:** He took the streetcar.

**PARSONS:** Fifteenth and Pennsylvania Avenue was the closest stop we used to go to.

**METZGER:** Just because it was on the diagonal instead of walking down Kentucky to go to the turnaround. Do you remember other places your friends' fathers worked? What they did?

**PARSONS:** Hmmm ... I used to pal around with a boy named Jack Robinson. He lived in 1626 G Street. His father was a fireman, and I think eventually he became a fireman. A couple of doors across G from us at 1609, the Hutchisons. Their father worked for a crane service company which rented out cranes and did crane work. And being in that job, they fell into their father's footsteps and eventually they got into crane rental themselves and had a fleet of dump trucks—Hutchison Brothers dump trucks. You see quite a few of those around. They have a pretty good business going, I guess. They're the only ones I can think of.

**METZGER:** What about where your family shopped for food?

**PARSONS:** That was at 15<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania Avenue. It was originally called the Sanitary. That was the name of the store. It eventually evolved into Safeway, I think. [Information from Capitol Hill Restoration Society: the Sanitary Grocery store was built at 732 15<sup>th</sup> Street SE in 1926; it was a single-story building, 20x50 feet. By 1943, it was a Safeway, by 1960 the building was a laundry, and by 1997 a laundromat.]

They didn't have computers and everything in those days. But you used to walk in a store and tell the clerk what you wanted. He'd go to the shelf and get what you wanted, bring all the items back that you told him you wanted and write the price of each one on a paper bag; add them all up, and tell you the final total.

**METZGER:** Did that grocery store have meat and produce?

**PARSONS:** Yes.

**METZGER:** So that's where you went. Did you go very often to Eastern Market?

**PARSONS:** Oh, no. I guess we might have gone in there sometimes when we went to the theater or something up by Pennsylvania Avenue—the Avenue Grand, but not normally. There was an A&P between Eastern Market and the Sanitary.

**METZGER:** So that was at 15<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania. I was trying to figure out how many blocks you would be carrying groceries. Or did you use the car?

**PARSONS:** No, we didn't have a car until I was 17 years old, and my father let me buy a car.

**METZGER:** Oh, but the family didn't have one before then?

**PARSONS:** No, and we didn't have a telephone either.

**METZGER:** Do you remember when—were there always electric lights in your house?

**PARSONS:** In the house, yes. We always had electricity in the house, but across the street from us there was a lamplight or a gas light. A lamplighter used to come around every evening and light the lamp.

**METZGER:** Did you ever see them put it out?

**PARSONS:** I can't remember them putting it out.

**METZGER:** Everybody always remembers them lighting it. I've gotten one or two people to say, yes, they do remember them putting it out in the morning. But it's very interesting.

**PARSONS:** That was our home base, when we were playing hide-and-seek, tag or something. They'd come back and touch the gas light.

**METZGER:** They were fairly short, weren't they?

**PARSONS:** Yes, they were.

**METZGER:** And the light, can you describe that?

**PARSONS:** It seems like they raised a globe or something.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

TAPE 1, SIDE 2

**METZGER:** We were talking about the lamplighter when the tape needed to be turned over. So there was just one light on the street.

**PARSONS:** Just one that I recall.

**METZGER:** Do you remember when the electric lights came in?

**PARSONS:** I don't recall.

**METZGER:** When you look down G Street, you look and you see Congressional Cemetery to the east. Did you all play in the cemetery?

**PARSONS:** Yes, we did. We played, much to the dismay of the professional cemetery people there. His name was Mr. Shelton. He was always chasing us out of the cemetery. We used to walk on the stone or brick wall. That was one of our favorite things—walk on the wall.

**METZGER:** And push each other off? Did you play king of the mountain on the wall?

**PARSONS:** Yes, we did. And we were playing baseball next to the wall a lot of times the ball would go into the cemetery and we would have to climb over the wall to get the ball.

**METZGER:** So you saw it as a “fun” place in a way? I mean it was not a spooky place to you. It was just part of your scenery, not a park exactly.

**PARSONS:** That’s right. People walking, see what’s in there.

**METZGER:** A place to explore.

**PARSONS:** We used to have some chestnut trees. You couldn’t eat them, but we used to get them because they made good substitutes for rocks to throw.

**METZGER:** [Laughing.] Yeah, they would. That would hurt too! At Halloween time, was there anything special? Was it considered really spooky?

**PARSONS:** It was trick or treat like it is today. If you didn’t treat, you could find your fence gate maybe hanging up on a telephone pole. Or, what were some of those tricks? I can’t remember them all.

**METZGER:** Like soaping up windows ...

**PARSONS:** Nothing real bad.

**METZGER:** But you actually did go around for treats? Kids did get dressed up and go around for treats?

**PARSONS:** I guess some of them did. But I don’t remember going myself, actually, but I know they did. Or, if there was a neighbor they didn’t care too much for ... just kid stuff, nothing serious.

**METZGER:** Were there ever any problems? Serious kid problems? No fights between the G Street crew and the Kentucky Avenue kids?

**PARSONS:** We didn’t have such things. Everybody got on real well.

**METZGER:** When you went shopping for clothes, did you go downtown, or by that time was the little shopping center across the river open?

**PARSONS:** No, we went downtown to department stores—Kann’s, Lansburgh’s, Woodies.

**METZGER:** Oh, and there were some stores along Pennsylvania Avenue. Did you ever shop there?

**PARSONS:** No.

**METZGER:** Once you got on the streetcar or bus, you were just going to go all the way. I assume when you were young, let’s say under ten, you stayed mostly on G Street, but as you got older did your boundaries of play area expand?

**PARSONS:** Aye—yeah. I’m trying to think of the area. I guess we knew pretty well kids a couple blocks away, up to about D Street, on E Street. Kids from school—we knew where they lived and would go to visit them sometimes after school. But generally we stayed right there on G Street. I always had paper routes—all the different papers that I delivered. I used to get out of my little area right there. My Evening Star paper route went from Potomac Avenue all the way up to East Capitol, between 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>.

**METZGER:** Wow, that was a good territory. Was that like later elementary and junior high school?

**PARSONS:** High school. This pal I had on G Street. He had a ’34 Plymouth and I had a ’34 Dodge. We’d take both cars up to Eastern High School and park them. And after school we’d use his car to come home and change clothes and then go get our papers. He had a paper route which was out Potomac Avenue, K Street, that area. And I had one between 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>, between Potomac and East Capitol. So when I got up to the end of my route, I was right where I parked the car to go to school in the morning; I tied the wagon to the back of the car and pulled it to where we kept our wagons.

**METZGER:** So you delivered it using a wagon? One of those wooden wagons with high sides?

**PARSONS:** No, it didn’t have high sides but it had steel wheels, which rolled real easily.

**METZGER:** Do you remember how much you would make a month?

**PARSONS:** Oh, probably \$20 or \$30 a month.

**METZGER:** That was pretty good money for that time.

**PARSONS:** Most times in those days, if customers didn’t pay, the paper boy made the loss up. But we had a real good system. The papers were delivered to these two houses built together, and downstairs, in the basement, this man, the distributor, he received the papers from the Star printing company, and he had set up a bench in the basement for each of our routes. We’d count our papers and separate them for each block. And then at the end of each month, we’d go out and collect. We had a certain amount of change he

provided for us and a bag and everything. It was real detail, strict—I mean real businesslike, and we didn't have to pay if the customers didn't pay. He absorbed it. It was more like a job than a kid's paper route. That's when I first got my social security card—doing a paper route, working for him.

**METZGER:** So that was about in late 30s.

**PARSONS:** Yes, late 30s—'37, '38.

**METZGER:** Social Security had just gotten started ...

**PARSONS:** It got started back in '32 I think.

**METZGER:** Did you all ever go down to the river and play?

**PARSONS:** There used to be a dump there, at the outskirts of the cemetery, between the railroad tracks and the cemetery. We used to go down there once in a while—get on the tracks. We'd cross that little trestle at times, hoping a train didn't come along.

**METZGER:** From Pennsylvania Avenue, is the bridge going over [that] place at the cemetery the only place you could get down to the actual river bank—other than the other side, where the park is?

**PARSONS:** I suppose it was. You couldn't really get down to the river bank from that side of the river. The only time you could get next to the river was when we crossed the bridge to go to the Fairlawn swimming pool there.

**METZGER:** Did they have the miniature golf then?

**PARSONS:** No, just the pool. We used to walk across the wooden sidewalk on a bridge that was all steel girders and everything before they built the new bridge. They had a real nice swimming pool there that we used to go to when it got too hot.

**METZGER:** So it was an outdoor pool?

**PARSONS:** Outdoor pool—when school got out.

**METZGER:** Were there ball fields down there? Picnic grounds?

**PARSONS:** I think there was a golf course ... but we weren't old enough to be playing golf.

**METZGER:** Had no appeal, did it? But baseball now, where exactly did you all play baseball? I brought a map because I wanted to make sure I had that figured out right.

**PARSONS:** Between the G Street gate [of Congressional Cemetery] and Potomac Avenue, there was a grassy area. It wasn't very wide. You had to watch out for the cars coming up and down 17th Street.

**METZGER:** Was 17th Street busier?

**PARSONS:** It was more or less busier. That was a bus route for buses going up to East Capitol Street and over to H Street NE.

**METZGER:** Can you describe how Barney Circle looked when you were ... ?

**PARSONS:** Well, there was a [unclear] and bushes and all at the foot of 17<sup>th</sup> Street, but then closer to Pennsylvania Avenue there was a clearing. I've seen some kids playing baseball there. Not normally the G Street kids.

**METZGER:** I see, maybe the Kentucky Avenue kids came down here and played.

**PARSONS:** It seemed like they were bigger kids or something. But then, let's see, when you turned off 17th at the circle there, there was about four houses I guess and then between Kentucky Avenue and Pennsylvania there was a gas station. In this little area that's about the only thing that would resemble a circle. The streetcar used to come down to 15<sup>th</sup> Street then come down to K Street and go to K Street and then make a turn there.

**METZGER:** Oh, maybe that's a bus turn-around because there was a circular thing ...

**PARSONS:** The streetcars came down 15<sup>th</sup> to K and then to Barney Circle.

**METZGER:** And then turned up and went back. And when you were young, they probably didn't have the little building. You know, at the end, they had a little brick building that had—[a] diner is probably too much of a word for it—but there wasn't anything when you were young. [Still looking at the map.] You said there was a gas station there. And then of course, at 15<sup>th</sup> Street, that's where you said ...

**PARSONS:** A grocery store was. There was an A&P store about half-way up the block there, but it didn't seem like it did too much business.

**METZGER:** Oh, it wasn't as popular. Were there any other stores in the area?

**PARSONS:** Well, at 15<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania Avenue, they had a tavern where people went to get beer, and then they had a bakery across the street from the Sanitary. I think they had a shoe repair place there. Around the corner they had a little delicatessen, I think, on Pennsylvania Avenue. They had a beauty shop



where my mother used to go to get her hair fixed. And on 14<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania there was a drugstore that we used to patronize a lot, called Smizers. There was a little park there.

**METZGER:** Okay. That's where the Metro is now—14<sup>th</sup> and Penn and Potomac. Then your Buchanan School is over here between 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> on E. It's a very pretty building.

**PARSONS:** You sound like you're very familiar with that area.

**METZGER:** Well, I grew up in Beltsville, Maryland, but my family went to church at 12<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania, there was the First Brethren Church there. It sort of looks like a big library.

**PARSONS:** I remember a Fisher's Bakery there at 12<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania.

**METZGER:** Yes, on the other side of the street. It was a very nice bakery and Frager's Hardware. So I knew that area. Now, I guess that was another one of my questions. We didn't say Capitol Hill; we would say that was 12<sup>th</sup> and Penn or 12<sup>th</sup> and E.

**PARSONS:** We never considered ourselves on Capitol Hill.

**METZGER:** How did you tell people where you lived?

**PARSONS:** We'd just say, "Southeast Washington."

**METZGER:** But if they pressed you more than that—

**PARSONS:** Congressional Cemetery.

**METZGER:** Congressional Cemetery or Barney Circle—did you use that as a reference point? You were up on the Hill ...

**PARSONS:** Seventeenth and Pennsylvania was what it was known as. I think that's what the streetcars were marked, if I remember right, so that was, more or less, the designation for that area I think.

**METZGER:** What about sledding in the winter?

**PARSONS:** Well, there at Barney Circle there was a steep hill, where K Street came in, called Dead Man's Hill. We used to use that to slide down there on our sleds. Otherwise, we'd just go along up the street, run along and then hop on it.

**METZGER:** Okay, this is such a—I guess that was just too traffic-y—Kentucky Avenue—because that is such a beautiful hill.

**PARSONS:** Actually, I had my sled taken away from me because the house on the corner of 17<sup>th</sup> and G had about a three-foot bank to it, I guess. I must have been about eight years old maybe, and I slid down the bank on my sled and drifted into the street just as a car was turning the corner there. It ran over my knee, but it didn't seem to hurt me. It smashed my sled up. I never had a sled after that. Just didn't use a sled after that, I guess. But that was the end of my sledding days. There must have been snow there because probably my knee got impacted in the snow there.

**METZGER:** It ran over that, but the sled just didn't go down. Let's see, did your parents socialize with neighbors?

**PARSONS:** Yes, my mother was always going next door or two doors away—they were friendly together. About four doors to the right of us, there was a Danish family, called the Seitz, I think. They had about three daughters that my sister used to visit quite often. Across the street, the Hutchison Brothers had a sister named Wanda that my sister played with. At 1607 there was an Alta Dyer ...

**METZGER:** Oh, Alta Dyer? I think she went to the Brethren Church.

**PARSONS:** I think she lives out in Tysons Corner here now, in one of those big apartment buildings.

**METZGER:** Oh, really? But she was your sister's age?

**PARSONS:** Yes.

**METZGER:** But there was a Dyer family at the church and one of them, I think, was—but I was young and I'm not remembering that well. That's interesting. Did your parents belong to any groups? Your father with the Kiwanis Club or ...

**PARSONS:** No. I used to go to 15<sup>th</sup> Street Christian Church right there on Kentucky Avenue. My father used to go to a Congregational Church up on Massachusetts Avenue—NE, go up to Lincoln Park and then continue on Massachusetts Avenue for a couple of blocks. He was a Congregationalist, but I went to the Christian Church there.

**METZGER:** The one that is no longer there anymore.

**PARSONS:** My mother didn't go because she was deaf.

**METZGER:** The 15th Street church—did they have a lot of activities for children?

**PARSONS:** I guess they did, but I didn't go.

**METZGER:** How did you all differentiate between ... I think we hit on it a little bit, you'd say Congressional Cemetery, were there other names for neighborhoods, or was it mostly 15<sup>th</sup> and D or 12<sup>th</sup> and E?

**PARSONS:** Yes, the street names.

**METZGER:** Using the coordinates. Did you get a sense of neighborhood when you grew up? A sense of belonging? A sense of place? It strikes me as an observer that, because of the way the streets are, you might have a sense of that is a special little place.

**PARSONS:** I've always thought if I ever became a millionaire or something, I'd like to buy that plot back and make it a park or something.

**METZGER:** Because it felt so park-like?

**PARSONS:** No, just because it was where I grew up, and I think a park there would be nice.

**METZGER:** Did you feel like, with a lot of trees and grass, it was a park-like area?

**PARSONS:** No, we had a park there between Kentucky Avenue and 16<sup>th</sup> Street—a little triangular park, but we didn't play on it. There were some flowers in the center. I don't know who put the flowers there. Then there was a triangular park between 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> on Potomac Avenue. My father taught me how to skate along that sidewalk.

**METZGER:** Did you all do a lot of roller skating? And what were the other things that kids made?

**PARSONS:** We used to make a scooter out of an orange crate. We'd take a board and nail an orange crate to it and take a skate and take it apart—have the front wheels and the back wheels on the board. We used that as a scooter. When I was really young, I had a tricycle and I used to tilt it over and ride on two wheels a lot. But I'd go around the block on that.

**METZGER:** Do you remember of any problems that the neighborhood had—any potholes or things that the adults might come together and talk about?

**PARSONS:** I can't think of any problems. It was a very friendly neighborhood. Everybody minded their own business, I guess you could say.

**METZGER:** I guess most of the families, at least in this area, were white families at the time.

**PARSONS:** All of them at the time.

**METZGER:** When you were growing up ... this area [indicating on map area north of proposed Barney Circle Historic District] might have had more black families?

**PARSONS:** On 17<sup>th</sup> Street there, between Potomac Avenue and E Street, there was about four houses where colored people lived. We called them colored people at the time. They kept to themselves and it didn't seem like they wanted to mingle or anything.

**METZGER:** The kids didn't play in the street? Well, you all were playing on G Street ...

**PARSONS:** No, they were there, and we were where we were.

There used to be a bakery called Holmes to Homes. They had a horse and buggy, delivering baked goods. They used to come around the neighborhood, and I got friendly with the driver and he used to let me drive the horses and all.

**METZGER:** Oh, wow. Great.

**PARSONS:** Once we were up at 19<sup>th</sup> and Potomac and had the horse and wagon parked right there at the corner, and some car was making a U-turn and came close to the horse. The horse backed up, and I thought he was going to tip the wagon over. But he didn't.

**METZGER:** Exciting for a moment, huh?

**PARSONS:** But it used to be fun ... I sort of helped him to deliver his bakery goods. I used to ride up on the horse and wagon.

**METZGER:** That would be fun. What other things would be delivered?

**PARSONS:** We had a huckster come around the neighborhood all the time, delivering fresh vegetables and all. He had a truck, double parked there, and all the neighbors would come out and buy what they wanted off it.

**METZGER:** Was that usually once a week?

**PARSONS:** Probably a couple of times a week. The milkman came. And it seemed like we had two mail deliveries a day too—door to door. Houses had furnaces then, most of them on G Street. And they had a section in the front of the basement there where they stored the coal. And they used to dump the coal in the street when they delivered it, and usually a black man would take a bushel basket, fill the basket up, and take it up and empty in that window.

**METZGER:** So you had a coal furnace too?

**PARSONS:** We had coal at the beginning, later converted to gas.

**METZGER:** Is there anything else that you're remembering? Oh, I know, the Bonus Army?

**PARSONS:** What got my attention on that is that there were so many of them, and they were staying over in people's garages and everything.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

TAPE 2, SIDE 1

**METZGER:** Mr. Parsons was telling us about life in Barney Circle neighborhood, and he was beginning to talk about the Bonus Army marchers.

**PARSONS:** Yes, it was a big thing for me because there were so many of them, and it was just a time of life when they were trying to get their bonuses. It was something I was really interested in, I guess. They all seemed real nice, and I could sympathize with their wants. I guess it wasn't too much of a history for a lot of people, but it was to me.

**METZGER:** I've had other people that have said that some came through the neighborhood, sometimes asking for food, some families sometimes took things over to the Anacostia flats or the park over there. And so I think it was, for Capitol Hill, because so many people were coming between the Anacostia and 11<sup>th</sup> Street, Pennsylvania Avenue and the Capitol.

**PARSONS:** Right there at the rail cars, the side tracks there, there was quite [a group].

**METZGER:** I had never heard of that place. I had heard that going across the 11<sup>th</sup> Street bridge, right as you go over, that there was an "encampment," that was the phrase used, but the rail cars is something that I hadn't heard of. And then, about Sousa's funeral?

**PARSONS:** That was a big thing for me. I never saw such a long funeral procession. And, like I say, he was sort of my hero I guess. I liked his music, his life. I saw the movie about him. I was real proud to, you know, know him.

**METZGER:** To be from the same neighborhood as he was from—Southeast.

**PARSONS:** That's something I meant to ask you too. You live right down there near where he lived.

**METZGER:** I live right next to his birthplace.

**PARSONS:** I don't know exactly where it is, but I know it is in that area.

**METZGER:** It's 636 G Street, right next door to my house. So I have a—and he went to Christ Church, which is where I go, so I have a special fondness for him myself. I guess they were playing music? Do you remember bands?

**PARSONS:** I don't remember him playing music, but on Memorial Day—Decoration Day they used to call it—they set up a bandstand in Congressional Cemetery, and they had a band playing.

**METZGER:** Oh, really? During the day while people were fixing up the graves?

**PARSONS:** Hmm [assent].

**METZGER:** Were there problems associated with Congressional Cemetery? Criminals lurking or something like that?

**PARSONS:** Oh, you mean, like turning over tombstones or something? We didn't seem to have that in those days. The worst thing was maybe we used to play on top of vaults. [Laughing.] Between the vaults, we used to jump from one vault to another, and I guess that wasn't too appreciated at the time.

**METZGER:** But very understandable from a child's point of view.

**PARSONS:** We didn't really have any trouble.

**METZGER:** Because later on, there were problems with people doing drugs and all that because it was so open and difficult to police.

**PARSONS:** I never saw a policeman around there. It was always a nice, quiet neighborhood. The only thing is, once I was riding my bicycle in Lincoln Park. You're not supposed to ride a bicycle in the park. I didn't know it at the time, but a policeman took me back to my house and told my parents I wasn't supposed to be riding in Lincoln Park. He just left me there, just gave me the warning.

**METZGER:** So he walked you all the way back?

**PARSONS:** Well, he drove.

**METZGER:** How mortifying! Going through the neighborhood being trailed by a police car!

**PARSONS:** It wasn't a police car, a private car, I guess, but he was in uniform. But I didn't know you weren't supposed to ride in the park.

**METZGER:** That brings up because ... there were playgrounds and there were parks, and parks, as I understand it, were supposed to be passive—sit and walk and something like that. Where would your playground have been?

**PARSONS:** We didn't really have a playground.

**METZGER:** The closest one, unless there was something at Buchanan School would have been ...

**PARSONS:** Buchanan had a playground, but we didn't go there for anything after school.

**METZGER:** That was just the school playground for recess time.

**PARSONS:** Hmmm. It seems like a little tiny crushed stone covering it. It wasn't paved or anything.

**METZGER:** Oh, it wasn't even macadam? Just dirt?

**PARSONS:** Not dirt exactly, little pebbles. I don't know what you'd call it.

**METZGER:** The Potomac Avenue playground, which was at 11<sup>th</sup> and Potomac Avenue, right down there by the Navy Yard.

**PARSONS:** Yes, there was a big playground down there, between Ninth and 11<sup>th</sup>. And there was a firehouse there between Eighth and Ninth and that was turned into a Police Boys Club. Actually, I worked there as a wood shop instructor for a while, teaching boys wood crafts and all.

**METZGER:** After you got out of high school?

**PARSONS:** After I got out of the Navy. I was married, and the apartment I lived in, there was a policeman assigned to the Police Boys Club, and he got me the job there.

**METZGER:** After you got out of the Navy, what did you do?

**PARSONS:** Well, I got an apartment over on Massachusetts Avenue, across from Fort Dupont. We lived there about 13 years, and then decided we had better buy a house, so we went out to Cape Forest subdivision in Landover, Maryland, and bought our first house there. We lived there maybe about five years, and we wanted to buy a little bit larger house, so we bought a house up in District Heights, Maryland. Then another five years [later], we decided we wanted a different house; my wife wanted to move out here in Virginia, so we bought this one.

**METZGER:** And you've worked for the Department of Defense?

**PARSONS:** Yes, I came back to my job at the Navy Yard for a year or so.

**METZGER:** But they were closing down, weren't they?

**PARSONS:** Not at the time. But there was an office job opening, it would have been a supply office where the store parts and guns and everything. I transferred to a white-collar job there, using my Navy experience, my machinist's experience, reading blueprints and everything. That office moved to Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, and I didn't choose to move so I transferred to another agency. Well, I guess in my whole government career I probably worked for two or three different agencies: Navy, Armed Forces Supply Support Center (which was under the Department of Defense), and finally GSA. GSA supplies different things for the government—buildings, supplies and I worked there until I retired in, let's see, '89 I retired.

**METZGER:** A long career. Well, I think I've gotten through my questions. Can you think of anything else we haven't talked about?

**PARSONS:** One thing that I remember doing as a child. The streetcar company used to have what they called "open cars."

**METZGER:** Oh, yeah.

**PARSONS:** Sort of like the San Francisco cable cars—step up to a row of little benches, sit and the conductor would come along the side running board, I guess you'd call it, collect the fares and all. That used to go from Pennsylvania Avenue out to Glen Echo, and riding from Georgetown to Glen Echo was like a railroad, you know, open space. The tracks weren't maintained the best I guess, the streetcar used to bounce up and down, a ride in itself.

**METZGER:** I've heard some people say they rode out and back but didn't go in. Did you go in to Glen Echo once you got out there?

**PARSONS:** Yes.

**METZGER:** That was a summer-time thing though.

**PARSONS:** It was a good amusement park. That was where we went for our amusements. Then, in the summertime, on our vacation to the beach, we'd probably be down to Chesapeake Beach or North Beach.

**METZGER:** You didn't go all the way to the ocean, because that was a long trip?

**PARSONS:** No. They used to have a train that went from Seat Pleasant to Chesapeake Beach. It wasn't air conditioned or anything, but there was a steam engine and all the cinders from the steam engine would fly into the passengers. We didn't mind it though.



**METZGER:** You just emerged with a brown face from all the cinders ...

**PARSONS:** I think my father used to pay ten cents for me to go along as a child on the train from Seat Pleasant to Chesapeake Beach.

**METZGER:** So, when you got down there, it was just a day trip?

**PARSONS:** Yes, but sometimes we rented a cottage at North Beach. Chesapeake Beach didn't seem to have many cottages to rent but North Beach did.

**METZGER:** So you'd stay down for a week or a long weekend. So your grandparents weren't nearby, were they?

**PARSONS:** My grandfather was living over in Naylor Gardens with my aunt and uncle, but I guess my grandmother must have died before I was born. I don't remember her.

**METZGER:** That was your mother's parents?

**PARSONS:** Yes.

**METZGER:** And your father was from Michigan. You never went out there?

**PARSONS:** I took a trip with him once, and we found the house where he grew up, and we asked the people if we could look inside. My father said it still had the original wall paper that it had when he was there. [Laughing.]

**METZGER:** Oh, really! Good wallpaper! We've covered schools ... high school?

**PARSONS:** I was in the high school cadets there at Eastern. We used to, after school, get out on the street there and march and do drills with our guns and all. We had to wear those uniforms which I wouldn't want to put on now—detachable collars.

**METZGER:** They were pretty stiff, weren't they? Were there any teachers that you remember? And what did you do for—you did mention going to movies?

**PARSONS:** We used to go to Penn Theater and Avenue Grand.

**METZGER:** You didn't go to Eighth Street?

**PARSONS:** My father would get off work on Saturdays—they used to have to work a half-day on Saturdays—and we'd meet there at Seventh and Pennsylvania Avenue, and he'd take us to District Lunch. They had a cafeteria-like service, get what you want, and then instead of a table, they'd have these chairs

with a great big arm on them where you set your food and eat off it. Then there was a People's Drug Store—we'd get three candy bars for ten cents, and then we'd go into the Avenue Grand and see usually a Western movie. Buffalo Bill was my favorite player.

**METZGER:** Did you go down Eighth Street to the Academy?

**PARSONS:** Yes, they had about three different movies for ten cents on Saturday.

**METZGER:** Wow, that could keep you busy. At some point, there was a bowling alley there. Do you remember that?

**PARSONS:** Yes, that was below G Street, I think, toward the Navy Yard. A duckpin bowling alley. I'd been there a couple of times, I guess. My brother-in-law used to be on a team there and he went there quite often.

**METZGER:** I can't think of what else they had there—some billiard parlors ...

**PARSONS:** The Marine Barracks there used to have, I guess they called it a "tattoo," every Friday.

**METZGER:** In the summertime they still do.

**PARSONS:** People used to come for a long distance to see it.

**METZGER:** Do you remember the Marine Band or Navy Band playing anyplace else, in the parks?

**PARSONS:** Not a park ... We used to go down to the waterfront by the Lincoln Memorial. They had a barge there and bands playing there—the service bands. We'd sit on the steps there and listen. We used to do that often.

**METZGER:** And going to the museums? Did you go to the museums a lot?

**PARSONS:** Yeah, when I was a kid, my father used to buy a weekly pass for the streetcars and buses. I think it cost a dollar and a half at the time he was riding. He'd buy it for the week, transportation to and from work. But on Sunday, one adult and two kids could ride on it and go all over Washington and the Maryland suburbs and all. My father used to let me use the pass and I had two pals ride along with me and we used to ride streetcars and buses all over the Washington area.

**METZGER:** And hop out when you wanted to.

**PARSONS:** Yeah, we'd go to the museums and we'd go to Union Station. One time the royal blue train, the Chesapeake and Ohio train—we got friendly with the engineer and he let us up in the cab in the engine.

**METZGER:** Oh, wow, that was pretty exciting.

**PARSONS:** We used to have little sailboats we'd take down to the reflecting pool between the monument and the Lincoln Memorial and sail boats across the water there. It was quite a busy place, I guess.

**METZGER:** I guess so. You all had a lot of things you found to do. Did you do kite flying?

**PARSONS:** As a Boys Club instructor and all, we had kite contests. We made kites in the wood shop, and then took them over to Fairlawn and had contests—whose goes the highest and everything. We also had little boats that we made in the wood shop and took them down to the reflecting pool and sailed them.

**METZGER:** And the roller derby ... the cars?

**PARSONS:** Soapbox derby. We made a soapbox derby for the race.

**METZGER:** Were there Boy Scout troops or was most of this done through ...

**PARSONS:** The Police Boys Club—now it's the Police Boys and Girls clubs.

**METZGER:** Right. Well, the girls need help too. All right, I really do appreciate all the time you've given us.

**PARSONS:** It brought back lots of memories.

**METZGER:** Any people you stay in contact with from that time?

**PARSONS:** No. I guess it was too long ago.

**METZGER:** Do you think you have any photographs?

**PARSONS:** I'm not saying I have any photographs, but I can't remember any.

**METZGER:** Yes, sometimes it's you and your sister standing on the front steps or on the street.

**PARSONS:** I have some, but I don't know where they are.

**METZGER:** Well, thank you very much.

END OF TAPE 2/SIDE 1

END OF INTERVIEW