



THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER
OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA



Oral History Interview

with

Lee And Janet Ness

Interviewer: *Kerry James Reed*

Narrator: *Lee and Janet Ness*

Location of Interview:

E. Del Ray Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia, 22314

Date of Interview: *12/23/2023*

Transcriber: *Kerry James Reed*

Summary:

Lee and Janet Ness discuss their experiences in Del Ray since moving to the neighborhood in the 1980s; Janet also discusses the differences between English

and American Main Streets; Lee discusses researching the Town of Potomac and Del Ray; and both discuss the changes they have seen in Del Ray over the last 30 years.

Notes:

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General	Del Ray; Alexandria; Mount Vernon Ave; Historic Preservation; Neighborhood; Development; Town of Potomac; Community; Historic District; Architecture; Del Ray Citizens Association; History of Alexandria; History of Del Ray; Board of Architectural Review (B.A.R.)
People	Lee Ness; Janet Ness; Susan Escherich; C.S. Taylor Burke; Frank Benson; Verna Benson; John Keegan; Ray Mahmood
Places	Del Ray; Mount Vernon Ave; Alexandria; London, England; Princeton, NJ; E Del Ray Ave; Maybury Hill, NJ; St. Mary's the Virgin Church, London, England; Greenwich, CN; Commonwealth Ave; Evening Star Cafe; St. Elmo's

Lee Ness: [00:00:00] My name is Lee Ness. It's December 21st, 2023. We're on East Del Ray Avenue in Alexandria. [00:00:06][5.7]

Janet Ness: [00:00:08] My name is Janet Ness and it is the 21st of December 2024, oh 23. I screwed it up. [laughs] [00:00:17][8.6]

Lee Ness: [00:00:19] We're not making much progress. Have you noticed that? [00:00:22][3.3]

Kerry James Reed: [00:00:23] It's okay. [00:00:23][0.3]

Janet Ness: [00:00:26] Um, okay. Well, I'm keep thinking about 2024, so. All right. Okay, I'll start again. [00:00:31][5.5]

Kerry James Reed: [00:00:32] No. It's okay. And I am Kerry James Reed. It is the 21st of December, 2023, and we are on East Del Ray Avenue. So thank you guys so much for, doing this for me. I know it's been a long time coming. But I'm excited that we finally get to sit down and have this interview. So, I guess we can start with some basic stuff. Where were you born, Lee? [00:00:53][21.2]

Lee Ness: [00:00:54] Princeton, new Jersey. [00:00:55][1.0]

Kerry James Reed: [00:00:55] Princeton, new Jersey. [00:00:56][0.4]

Janet Ness: [00:00:57] And I was born in Cuckfield, Sussex in England. [00:00:59][2.6]

Kerry James Reed: [00:01:01] Perfect. Could you describe where you grew up, Lee?
[00:01:03][2.3]

Lee Ness: [00:01:05] It was one of the first of the postwar suburbs. My father designed the house himself; he was an engineer. Not a terribly good architect, unfortunately, but an engineer. So, the house was sturdy. After that, that was in 1952, I guess, and after that, a developer moved in and bought the rest of the land and put up cookie cutter, split level houses.
[00:01:39][34.0]

Kerry James Reed: [00:01:40] And you, Janet? [00:01:40][0.2]

Janet Ness: [00:01:43] My early years were spent in large semi-detached houses. What would you would call a duplex in New Malden and in Wimbledon. And then later on, we moved to an Edwardian terraced house, which is a row house. And they were put up in 1910.
[00:02:03][19.1]

Kerry James Reed: [00:02:04] So you said that you lived in Princeton, New Jersey, where, you know, that's a very historic area, at least in the minds of America. Were there any significant historical structures around you while you were growing up? [00:02:19][15.1]

Lee Ness: [00:02:20] Across the street we had Maybury Hill, which was a house, owned by a signer of the Declaration of Independence. At the time, it was considered a grand house; by today's standards, of course, it wouldn't be. The house was very nice. Stone, with I think a stucco exterior. And you also had a huge stone barn that was a magnet for the young kids. They tried to keep people out. They put plywood over the doors and everything. It didn't work. We managed to get in and it was a lot of fun exploring the old barn. I was surprised when I got home from college one time and the barn was gone. It was just vacant field. And I asked what happened, and they said a hurricane came up and the barn collapsed. At first, I couldn't believe it. It was a stone structure, but apparently it had been ill maintained, and it just didn't survive, which is a real shame because I always thought that barn was better than the house. But that's the way things go. [00:03:47][87.3]

Kerry James Reed: [00:03:48] Yeah, absolutely. And you, Janet, I imagine growing up where you did that, you were surrounded by a lot of historical structures? [00:03:54][6.3]

Janet Ness: [00:03:56] Yes. Both schools that I went to, were Church of England schools, so they were attached to the church. And the one that is most significant, I went to Saint Mary's School in Merton Park, and it was attached to the Saint Mary, the Virgin Church, which was built in 1115. We had to attend church every Thursday morning. And a few famous people are connected to the church. One was a midshipman who sailed with Captain Cook on the Endeavor, and he was the first person to set foot in Australia. [00:04:37][41.7]

Kerry James Reed: [00:04:39] Oh, wow. [00:04:39][0.1]

Janet Ness: [00:04:42] The first Englishman. But the most famous person that was there was Lord Nelson. And he... [00:04:52][10.5]

Kerry James Reed: [00:04:53] Oh Wow. [00:04:53][0.2]

Janet Ness: [00:04:53] Yeah. Well, he lived in an area called Merton Place where he bought a house and a lot of land which is since long gone and all been divided up. But he worshiped there when he lived at Merton Place. And he took his daughter to Sunday school. At the front of the, very front of the pews, there was his bench where he used to sit when he went to church. [00:05:22][29.2]

Kerry James Reed: [00:05:23] That's incredible. [00:05:23][0.2]

Janet Ness: [00:05:24] And it's still there to this day. And over the main door into the church, inside was his hatchment, hanging above the door, but it was in tatters then. And so I'm sure it's, there's not much of it left now because I don't think anybody's thought about preserving it. So, it was just hanging up there. [00:05:48][23.8]

Kerry James Reed: [00:05:50] Was that a big deal that Lord Nelson used to, you know, worship in the same place? Or is that just sort of like a, you know, something... [00:05:58][8.0]

Janet Ness: [00:05:59] It was just an everyday thing, you know? You know, you just grew up knowing it. So, I don't think when you're younger it is such a big deal. Now that I'm older and a lot of my school friends, we sort of begin to appreciate, you know, what we had, you know. But, we were more interested in the good looking vicar. [laughs] [00:06:29][29.7]

Kerry James Reed: [00:06:30] Absolutely. So where did you study in college, Lee? [00:06:39][9.0]

Lee Ness: [00:06:41] The University of Arizona for my B.A., New York Law School, for my JD and the LLM program, which is a post-doctoral master's, at the University of London. [00:06:54][13.4]

Kerry James Reed: [00:06:56] Very interesting. What took you to the University of London? Was there a significant draw or? [00:07:01][5.1]

Lee Ness: [00:07:03] It just seemed interesting place to do the study. And since, of course, we use common law and so did Britain, so does England, rather--Scotland doesn't-- it was appropriate. [00:07:21][18.3]

Kerry James Reed: [00:07:25] And you, Janet? Where did you study? [00:07:25][0.3]

Janet Ness: [00:07:25] I went to Kingston College, and I studied, retail management. Which has now become Kingston University. But that was in another historic place. The town is famous for

the coronation stone belonging to England. And it was used in 925 for the coronation of King Athelstan, a Saxon king. So, you know, history is all around you the whole time. So, I think in the UK, we tend to take it for granted. [00:08:02][36.8]

Kerry James Reed: [00:08:03] Yeah. [00:08:03][0.0]

Janet Ness: [00:08:04] But then I think people take it for granted here as well because, you know, they don't notice it slipping away if stuff is done. [00:08:14][10.2]

Lee Ness: [00:08:15] So I should point out that in the main building of University College London, as you pass through the door, there's a wooden box up ahead that contains the skull of Jeremy Bentham. [00:08:26][10.9]

Kerry James Reed: [00:08:27] Mhm. [00:08:27][0.0]

Lee Ness: [00:08:28] Why? I don't know, but apparently that's, Jeremy is popular there. [00:08:34][5.7]

Kerry James Reed: [00:08:35] So when you grew up in Princeton, you know, surrounded by some significant historical structures, right? Declaration of Independence signee, things like that. So, when you went to London to study, were you surprised at the attitude towards those things? Over in England? [00:08:53][17.3]

Lee Ness: [00:08:55] I don't think so. I think people tend to do take them for granted. You know, when you have a life and you're trying to get on with your life, you're either studying or you have to make a living and family and everything else. That takes up 95% of your brain cells, right? [00:09:19][23.2]

Kerry James Reed: [00:09:20] Right. So, then I'm assuming the two of you met while you were in England? [00:09:25][5.4]

Janet Ness: [00:09:26] No. [00:09:26][0.0]

Kerry James Reed: [00:09:27] No? [00:09:27][0.0]

Janet Ness: [00:09:30] We both worked for the same American company. Lee worked at the head office in Greenwich, Connecticut, and I was the manager of the European office in Henley on Thames in England. The first year that I worked there, the company sponsored a NATO sponsored symposium, and I was required to attend, and so were the employees from the head office in Greenwich. And that's where we first met. And the rest is history. [00:10:02][31.2]

Kerry James Reed: [00:10:05] So were you working for NATO at the time, Lee? [00:10:07][2.0]

Lee Ness: [00:10:08] No, I was working for a firm called DMS. We did defense research. Private firm. [00:10:15][6.9]

Kerry James Reed: [00:10:20] So then what prompted the move to Del Ray? [00:10:22][2.6]

Lee Ness: [00:10:25] When we first married, we rented in Greenwich, Connecticut. We rented the second floor of a woman's house, and at the time, Greenwich had the highest income per capita of any town in the country. [00:10:43][18.5]

Kerry James Reed: [00:10:44] Hmm. [00:10:44][0.0]

Lee Ness: [00:10:45] I'm sure still in the top ten. I don't know where it ranks, but it's very, very wealthy. And we looked around and immediately realized there was no way in our lifetimes that we were going to be able to afford a house in Greenwich. It just wasn't going to happen. So, when my company asked for volunteers to relocate from our Greenwich office to our Rosslyn office, my hand went up. [00:11:18][33.1]

Kerry James Reed: [00:11:19] Absolutely. So then, was there any particular reason you guys chose Del Ray as opposed to any other neighborhood around here? [00:11:29][10.5]

Lee Ness: [00:11:31] Well, Janet's English predisposition meant that she insisted that wherever we moved, it had to have a main street. [00:11:41][10.8]

Kerry James Reed: [00:11:43] Mhmm. [00:11:43][0.0]

Lee Ness: [00:11:43] That was a requirement. It has to have a main street. [00:11:46][3.0]

Janet Ness: [00:11:47] And sidewalks. [00:11:47][0.3]

Lee Ness: [00:11:48] And sidewalks. And that, of course, left out huge swaths of Northern Virginia. As a matter of fact, it limited us, if you don't want to go in D.C., to Alexandria and Annapolis. That's basically it. So, you know, we chose Alexandria because it's obviously closer to Rosslyn. And, then we started looking around and realized looking at Old Town, we were back in the Greenwich situation. We haven't looked at the smallest house in Old Town, which I think is what, eight feet wide or nine feet wide and two stories. Minuscule thing. And it's famous for being the smallest house in, I don't know, Northern Virginia, maybe. And we couldn't afford that. So we started looking around and after two years of looking fruitlessly in Old Town, we finally settled on the eastern side of Del Ray, where we actually could afford a fixer upper. [00:13:05][77.0]

Kerry James Reed: [00:13:08] So, what were your first impressions of Del Ray then? Besides, for, you know, it fitting the criteria: had to have a main street, had to have sidewalks? [00:13:15][6.7]

Janet Ness: [00:13:16] Pretty boring actually, and dull. Well, yeah. I mean, you know, I'd come from London, you know, where I grew up with Carnaby Street, King's Road, and, you know, Mary Quant and all the fashion and everything, you know. To suddenly come to, it's sort of like a bit of a backwater. But, you know, I knew that we could settle here and, you know, eventually find the house that we wanted. And also there was the lack of transportation. [00:13:54][37.6]

Kerry James Reed: [00:13:55] Mhm. [00:13:55][0.0]

Janet Ness: [00:13:56] You know I was used to going down the end of the street and I could more or less go anywhere I wanted to, or a seven minute walk to the train station and I could be in London in 20 minutes. Or you go in in the opposite direction, I could be at Hampton Court Palace or Kingston, you know? So, I was so used to having, well they were overground trains, they weren't underground trains, but it was a bit of a shock actually. [00:14:28][32.4]

Kerry James Reed: [00:14:31] So how did Mount Vernon Ave, the main street, compare to some of the other, main streets you grew up with in England? [00:14:38][7.3]

Janet Ness: [00:14:39] Well, I wouldn't. There wasn't anything that really interested me. There was a TV repair shop and accountants, which we did use. There was the Scott shop, uh, which sold ladies clothing and I think children's clothing. I went in there once and I thought, "I don't like these." And so that was the end of that. And I always used to go into Old Town because it was more modern and stuff. So, and there weren't the restaurants either. [00:15:14][34.8]

Lee Ness: [00:15:15] Well, let's not forget Mac's place. Mac's place was a bar, a dive bar. And not in the good sense of the word. I like good dive bars. This wasn't one of them. This was a dreadful, terrible place. A lot of fighting. And come closing time, the drunks would stagger out the door and scream obscenities at each other at the top of their lungs. And not very creatively either, much repetition. So, that was about it. If you wanted restaurants on Mount Vernon Avenue, you had to go down to Arlandria, which had RT's, which are still there. [00:16:07][51.8]

Janet Ness: [00:16:10] We always used to go into Old Town. That was a evening out. But when we first moved to Del Ray we were closer to Braddock Road Metro, and it was a duplex, and our landlady lived in the house next door, and we became very good friends with her. And, you know, she'd ask us what we were doing and where we were going, and we would tell her, you know, we're going down to Old Town, you know, for men to drink and that. And she said, "what do you want to go down to that dump for?" Because that's how she knew it when it was a port and, you know, drunken sailors and so forth. So, it shows you how things change. And that was still in her mind that that was a bit of a dump. [00:16:56][46.8]

Kerry James Reed: [00:17:04] Yeah. So, Lee, you mentioned Max's bar as some of the... [00:17:07][3.2]

Lee Ness: [00:17:08] Mac's. [00:17:08][0.0]

Kerry James Reed: [00:17:09] It's just Max bar? [00:17:10][1.0]

Lee Ness: [00:17:11] Just Mac. M-A-C. [00:17:12][1.3]

Janet Ness: [00:17:12] Oh, yeah. [00:17:12][0.0]

Kerry James Reed: [00:17:12] Oh, Mac's bar. [00:17:12][0.0]

Lee Ness: [00:17:15] Mac's. M-A-C'S. Mac's. [00:17:16][1.4]

Kerry James Reed: [00:17:17] So you mentioned Mac's bar and some of the unsavory characters that might have come out of it once it closed. And that got me thinking, you know, here you are moving into Del Ray, you know, a highly educated individual. What were the, like, class demographics like in Del Ray when you guys first moved here? [00:17:39][22.5]

Lee Ness: [00:17:40] It was working class. At the time we moved in, there was a demarcation line, Mount Vernon Ave. And this is in the late 80s, mid to late 80s. The area to the west of Mount Vernon Avenue that is between Mount Vernon and Commonwealth was regarded as being up and coming. There were signs of gentrification. The area is east of Mount Vernon, between Mount Vernon and US1 were regarded as slums or dumps. At the time, that's all we could afford, so that's where we moved. And in fact, our neighbors were very nice people who, you know, just absolutely wonderful people. So, I'm not sure where that came from, except that before we moved, Del Ray generally had a reputation as being a rough neighborhood. [00:18:46][65.8]

Janet Ness: [00:18:49] But we never saw anything of it, did we? [00:18:50][1.5]

Lee Ness: [00:18:51] We never saw anything of it. But even moving to the east side of Del Ray, the only evidence we ever saw was Mac's place. Other than that... [00:19:06][15.0]

Janet Ness: [00:19:06] And the bank at the end of the street was abandoned. [00:19:08][1.9]

Lee Ness: [00:19:09] Well, that had been abandoned since 1924. One of our neighbors, very nice guy, moved from West Virginia. And I was very surprised because one of our neighbors had done some research on the integration of African Americans into Del Ray. And she'd come across a document in the city archives dated about 1960, and it said basically, 'we're going to have trouble, or we could have trouble. A lot of these people who are moving in, they're not well socialized, they don't have good manners, we see trouble here.' And her reaction was, 'oh, I've got the smoking gun here as regards blacks.' She went a little bit further. No, it was West Virginians. It was people from West Virginia that they were worried about. And our neighbor across the street was from West Virginia. A good old boy from West Virginia. Hillbilly. And he said that he had never seen or taken a shower before he moved to Del Ray as an adult. He took baths. They had baths, but he had no idea when he moved here as an adult how to operate a

shower or what it was for. So, there were still remnants of that type of thinking around. Now, they were fine people, I liked them, but it is not the Del Ray of today. [00:21:00][110.5]

Kerry James Reed: [00:21:00] Yeah. So, you mentioned that a neighbor of yours was doing some research into the city. Were you particularly interested in that because of your own interest in history, or how did you come to learn about, you know, the history of Del Ray and the history of the Town of Potomac? [00:21:19][19.1]

Lee Ness: [00:21:20] I started on a very micro level. I wanted to know who owned my house and our neighbors' houses. And so I went to the courthouse in Arlington, because we were part of Arlington up until 1930, and tracked down the title. Taught myself how to follow a chain of title backwards using the land records in the clerk's office of the court. And I came up with, you know, a fairly good history of our house and the houses near us. And when we moved here, I continued it here and then expanded it to cover other houses. And there are some people who are very interested in their house. [00:22:10][50.3]

Kerry James Reed: [00:22:12] So, Janet, I'm sure that while your husband was doing all this research into the house, he's probably telling you about it, right? [00:22:20][7.4]

Janet Ness: [00:22:21] Not a whole lot. No. [00:22:22][0.8]

Kerry James Reed: [00:22:24] Oh, really? Okay. [00:22:25][0.7]

Janet Ness: [00:22:24] No, he just works away and that's it, you know? And then he'll tell me he's done something. [00:22:28][3.4]

Lee Ness: [00:22:32] She's busy. Yeah. [00:22:33][0.6]

Janet Ness: [00:22:34] Yeah. I mean, I was out working and, you know, coming from another country. And when I first came here, there was no internet. So there was a lot of things that I had to learn, you know. So you're constantly trying to find out stuff. So, you know, I thought well that was nice, you know. And we were both interested in architecture, you know, old buildings and that. So, I mean that's where we sort of met on that. And, you know, I like to know, but I don't have the patience to do the research that really does. [00:23:12][38.2]

Kerry James Reed: [00:23:13] But you mentioned an interest in architecture. So when you first moved to Del Ray, you know, like with Old Town you have the Georgian homes and everything like that. So there's something very significant about it at least immediately. I guess it's a very visible difference, suppose you could say [00:23:31][18.1]

Janet Ness: [00:23:31] Well, they're brick houses. As opposed to wooden houses. And we hardly have any wood houses in England, because of the Great Fire of London. [00:23:39][8.0]

Kerry James Reed: [00:23:40] Oh, right. [laughs] That makes a lot of sense actually. But what was your impression of the architecture of Del Ray when you first moved here? [00:23:48][7.7]

Janet Ness: [00:23:50] To be honest with you, I mean, I didn't really notice it that much. The first house we bought Lee took me to see it. He said, "what do you think about this?" And it was all, the porch was totally enclosed, and I can visualize things when things are removed. I can look at it and say, oh, yes, you remove that and you know it will look nice. And so that one was one of the first things we did on that house was... [00:24:20][30.2]

Lee Ness: [00:24:20] I was issued a sledgehammer. Within two days of the closing. [00:24:25][5.0]

Janet Ness: [00:24:26] Yeah. And then this house, well, Lee found this house because he used to run every day. And I started noticing houses when we got a dog and I used to walk around the area. And, you know, for the first two years we were here, we used to go out every Sunday looking at open houses. Because here you can't look at the house and know what it's like inside. Mostly in the UK you can. [00:24:56][29.8]

Kerry James Reed: [00:24:57] Mhm. [00:24:57][0.0]

Janet Ness: [00:24:58] So, you know, that was another learning curve and stuff. But some of the houses are interesting, others not. But very different from the UK from what I grew up with. Yeah. [00:25:14][16.5]

Kerry James Reed: [00:25:16] So when did you guys move into this house? [00:25:18][2.0]

Lee Ness: [00:25:20] '91. [00:25:20][0.0]

Janet Ness: [00:25:20] Yeah. [00:25:20][0.0]

Kerry James Reed: [00:25:24] And then was there anything about this home in particular that caught your eye? I mean, did you look in the archives to learn about the history of the home? [00:25:31][7.3]

Lee Ness: [00:25:32] No, I saw this on my runs every morning because we originally lived only about two blocks from here, and this was one of my favorite running routes, later jogging routes. And I passed by this, and I always thought it was interesting. It sat on the market for a year. There's a for sale sign out for a year. And I said, "oh, that's interesting." It's a good size house. It looks larger than it is. I said, "oh, that's very nice." And then the For Sale sign went down after a year. I said, "oh, well, I blew it on that one." Then about six months later the sign went back up again and again I dithered and finally, I said to Janet, "I've got to show you something. Walk with me." And so we went up here and I pointed out to her that in the shed, if you're looking from the street, you can see the original siding of the house, the narrow lap siding. At the time, it was covered in Perma Stone. You know that concrete that's made to look

like it's stone? And so we walked around to the front and I said, imagine the house without the Perma Stone, but with the wood siding you saw in the shed area. And she said, "it's beautiful." And I said, "yes, it is." So that was it. [00:27:03][91.7]

Kerry James Reed: [00:27:04] Absolutely. So, what made the Perma Stone, to you, so out of place? So the wood siding was clearly beautiful in your estimation, and the Perma Stone was just not? [00:27:16][12.4]

Janet Ness: [00:27:19] Just looked fake. [00:27:19][0.3]

Kerry James Reed: [00:27:20] Mhm. [00:27:20][0.0]

Lee Ness: [00:27:21] It is fake. [00:27:21][0.5]

Janet Ness: [00:27:21] Yeah. [00:27:22][0.4]

Lee Ness: [00:27:22] It's a house trying to be something that it's not. It's phony. From the top to the bottom it's just phony. It's not a stone house. It was never built as a stone house. It was never designed that way. It's just somebody in the early 50s, A: thought it looked good. And B: it promised that you never have to paint your house again. [00:27:49][26.8]

Kerry James Reed: [00:27:50] Mhm. [00:27:50][0.0]

Lee Ness: [00:27:52] And they didn't. Why that was a big selling point, I don't know. Because when they took off the Perma Stone, there was the original paint from 1910 and no other paint. So from 1910 to 1952 or '53, they had not painted that house. Why they thought that this was necessary then, having gone 40 years without painting, I don't know. But they did. And the Perma Stone does do that. It preserves the siding. We had to replace maybe 15% of the siding where it had gone bad. Water gets underneath and behind, and then it rots out. But that hadn't happened here, except in a very few areas. So, I think we had to replace, uh, 15%. [00:28:47][54.6]

Janet Ness: [00:28:48] It wasn't a whole lot. But that's the color that the house was, up on that board. [00:28:52][3.9]

Kerry James Reed: [00:28:53] Mhmm. [00:28:53][0.0]

Janet Ness: [00:28:54] Because that's a sign that they used when the street name changed. Well, the numbers changed. [00:28:59][5.8]

Lee Ness: [00:29:01] Yeah. And for the record, there's a wooden board up there, and it says: new number 20 East Payton Avenue. And Payton was the name of the street before the annexation. There's already a Payton in Old Town. So something had to give when this became part of Alexandria. And guess who lost that battle? That was us. At the same time, the rest of

the city had decided that the east west demarcation line would be Mount Vernon Ave, no, it would be Commonwealth. It had been Mount Vernon Ave when this was the town of Potomac. So, of course, they had to renumber the houses as well. So this house went from, let's see, 101 East Payton to 20 East Payton to 20 East Del Ray in the course of five or six years. But when we were doing some work, Janet went down into the crawlspace and started pulling out...

[00:30:10][69.4]

Janet Ness: [00:30:10] On my hands, I mean, I was literally on my stomach in the crawl space pulling out boards and that, because we wanted to see if we could find any of the original floorboards to repair some. And I pulled that out and gave it to Lee, and I said, "I'll throw that away," because I couldn't see it what was on there. And then we found that. So that's original to the house. [00:30:38][27.5]

Lee Ness: [00:30:38] Yeah, that had been sitting there since the 1930s or so. Down on the dirt in the subbasement. And we found it and said, "huh? How about that?" [00:30:48][10.2]

Kerry James Reed: [00:30:49] Yeah, that's really cool. [00:30:51][1.2]

Lee Ness: [00:30:51] It is. [00:30:51][0.2]

Kerry James Reed: [00:30:52] So it's clear from this that, you know, keeping the historical authenticity of your home was very important to you guys. [00:31:00][8.0]

Janet Ness: [00:31:00] Yes. [00:31:00][0.0]

Kerry James Reed: [00:31:01] So, can you describe why it was like that? Knowing that, you know, the Perma Stone was fake and etc. etc. and so forth, and why was keeping the historical specificity of the home so important? [00:31:17][16.1]

Janet Ness: [00:31:20] Because that's how it looked when it was built. And you want to maintain the character of the street. [00:31:26][5.4]

Kerry James Reed: [00:31:27] Mhm. [00:31:27][0.0]

Janet Ness: [00:31:28] I mean, four houses that you can look up from, well you can almost see one from here, but they're all still in their, more or less original state. And once you start building really high houses or, you know, adding on in different ways, it just upsets the balance, I think, of everything. [00:31:59][30.3]

Kerry James Reed: [00:32:00] Mhm. So how then do you think keeping the original structure of a home like yours contributes to the historical character of a historic district like the Town of Potomac or like Del Ray? What does it mean when these homes are changed? [00:32:24][24.3]

Janet Ness: [00:32:27] They're out of proportion, usually, to the rest of the area. [00:32:31][4.0]

Lee Ness: [00:32:35] Yeah, that is a big problem. Newer houses are invariably large. The average house in Del Ray, I didn't do a complete survey, but I took two streets, and I used the old data, and the average house size is probably around 1700 square feet. The new ones, of course, they want 3000, 4000 square feet, and they're huge. It disrupts the scale of what had been and was developed as a lower middle class, enclave. [00:33:25][50.0]

Kerry James Reed: [00:33:27] Mhmm. [00:33:27][0.0]

Lee Ness: [00:33:28] If you wanted in 1900 to move out of the city, if you are upper middle class and upper class, you moved to Rosemont. If you were lower middle class, you moved to Del Ray. The houses in Rosemont are much bigger and much grander than they are here. Going to Rosemont, their brick houses, by the standards of the time, they were grand houses. Nobody ever called the houses in Del Ray grand. They were comfortable, they were attractive, but they were not grand. And so what people are doing is they're coming in and they're building, or attempting, grand houses in Del Ray, and that's, it's not with the community was. It's remarkable that they were able to do such a good job, with limited finances. You know, the architects didn't start building homes for the middle class, designing homes for the middle class, until the 1890s. Before then there were architects who were building, of course, for the rich. They could design, you know, beautiful mansions, Victorian mansions. But nobody was designing for the middle class because the middle class tended to live in cities. You get better transportation. The middle class wants to move to what are now called suburbs. And all of a sudden, starting in the Chicago Exposition, architecture designing for the middle class. And you can see in Del Ray the progression of the house designs that were popular in the golden age of middle class design from maybe 1895 up until the Second World War, where you went from four squares to colonial revivals to beautiful bungalows and then to Cape Cods in the 1930s. And you could see it in Del Ray. And there were different developments in Del Ray. The original two were 1894. So, you have this whole--and then also, of course, is vacant lots. People built whatever they wanted to build whenever they wanted to build it. Whereas there are two developments in the middle of the historic district, Abingdon and Mount Vernon, that didn't open up until 1922. If you walk through those two areas, it is immediately apparent that you're going into a parallel universe because it's all bungalows. You have no colonial revivals, you have no four squares, it's all bungalows. And they're beautiful bungalows. I love bungalows, but that's what they were building. Whereas in the older parts of Del Ray you do have bungalows that were built, simply built later on. So to me, it's really important that you maintain the diversity of the area. You know, we are a museum of American residential architecture. We have everything here from 1895. We're also basically four squares and some faux-Victorians, up to World War two, at which point the Cape Cod had taken over and we have everything in between. And they're all at modest scale. That's the nice thing. [00:37:46][257.9]

Kerry James Reed: [00:37:47] So do you think that all the physical change that accompanies people building the 3000 square foot homes instead of the original 1700, what do you think that does to the nature of the historic district? [00:38:02][14.7]

Lee Ness: [00:38:03] Well, it's not a historic district anymore. [00:38:05][1.6]

Kerry James Reed: [00:38:09] I guess. At what point do you think, like, if there's too much change, this would stop being a historic district? You think such a thing is possible or? [00:38:17][8.4]

Lee Ness: [00:38:18] I have been told that the National Park Service, who administers the National Historic Districts and VDHR, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, I am told that they have a cut off line. They want x percentage of the houses in the district to be historic or be contributing structures. If they don't get to that bar, they don't get awarded the historic district designation. I don't know if they have ever tried to claw back a historic designation. Once they lose that, once they fall below that percentage. Now, if you look at the historic district of the town of Potomac and you compare that with the footprint of the town of Potomac itself, you'll see that the people who did the historic district took an X-ACTO knife on that map and cut out sizable portions of what had been the town of Potomac because there were new buildings in there. They cut out the area where the school is, for instance. That was part of the town of Potomac, it's not part of the town of Potomac historic district because the school is new. Up north, you have all sorts of, you have a Jiffy Lube and a car wash and what have you, they cut that out. They cut the Oakville triangle out, you know. So they were very careful when they originally drafted this to make sure that they met, whatever that magic number is. We are going to go below that magic number, whatever it is, every time a historic house gets torn down and they put up something new. We're slowly going down on that. And I don't know if the VDHR police come around and survey again and start pulling the historic markers out of the ground. It could happen. I hear people say they're afraid it's going to happen. I don't know whether they'll actually do it or not. [00:40:46][148.0]

Kerry James Reed: [00:40:50] So, Janet, when did you start seeing all of this physical change happen in Del Ray? Because when you all moved here, you know, you spent so much time restoring your home to maintain as much of the historical authenticity of it as possible. So what does it mean for you to see that other people, within your neighborhood, within your community, aren't doing the same? [00:41:14][23.5]

Janet Ness: [00:41:16] I think it's very sad. It's started, I think, in the late 80s, when people started flipping houses because they could buy houses here very cheaply compared to other places, and then they would flip them. And so you would lose a lot of the architecture, you know, the original wood siding, it would become vinyl siding or, you know, extra doors or windows put in. And then I think with HGTV [Home & Garden Television], that started people thinking about, people before used to do modest alterations to their house or things or renew stuff. But once HGTV's got really going and demolition is much more dramatic on television, than just, oh, well, just doing a slight change or something like that. And I think, you know,

rather than doing restoration, I think that's has a lot to do with it. And a lot of people want new and shiny. [00:42:33][76.6]

Kerry James Reed: [00:42:33] Yeah. [00:42:33][0.0]

Janet Ness: [00:42:34] Which isn't necessarily always the best. I think, you know, that's where it's started, and then it's getting worse now because, you know, you've got very successful building contractors coming in and they are buying up the houses. But just under a million that, you know, families could afford, and now they tear part of them off or take all the interior out, and then they just add on and make them into huge houses. And, you know, you're looking at 1.5 million, up to two million. And so it's pushing the middle class out, the lower middle class out of the area. [00:43:28][54.1]

Lee Ness: [00:43:29] The middle-middle class is being pushed out. [00:43:31][2.0]

Janet Ness: [00:43:32] Yeah. [00:43:32][0.0]

Lee Ness: [00:43:33] I know we couldn't afford to buy in Del Ray. If we hadn't been bought back in '92. And I speak to our neighbors, and most of them say the same thing: if we hadn't moved here five years ago, eight years ago, we couldn't afford it now. So, yeah, that's the price of progress they say. [00:43:58][24.8]

Janet Ness: [00:43:59] Well and the thing with this house was that it was a rental property, and they never had an open house to show it. And when we... [00:44:08][9.0]

Lee Ness: [00:44:09] For good reason. [00:44:09][0.4]

Janet Ness: [00:44:13] Yes. [laughs] Because it was deteriorating. But, you know, when I mentioned to friends and neighbors, you know, we had bought this house and I said, "oh, we love that house. You know, we wish we'd bought it," kind of thing. But, you know, we were the ones that made the attempt to visit the house. You know, we got our realtor to come in and we toured the house, and we could see what it could be because we had four kitchens when we moved in. So there's been a lot of blood, sweat and tears gone into this house. But I think it's worth it because I love it. [00:44:51][38.4]

Kerry James Reed: [00:44:52] Mhmm. Do you think that all the, you know, emotional investment into your house sort of spurred you to start the plaque program in Del Ray? Or how did that process come about? [00:45:05][13.0]

Janet Ness: [00:45:06] That was part of the Del Ray Citizens Association. They did the survey in 1990, and the president of the association in the year 2000, or maybe the previous year, came up with the idea of selling plaques for the historic houses. And I'm very good at administrative work and organizing, and so, there was a team of us that got together and... [00:45:42][36.2]

Lee Ness: [00:45:44] And it should be noted that it by that, the Citizens Association wanted nothing to do with it. The president of the Citizens Association thought it was a good idea, and he said, "we need some seed money to buy the first few plaques," or something, or stationery supplies. And it wasn't much, like 50 bucks. Can we borrow the 50 bucks from the Citizens Association will pay you back. And it was voted down, even as a nominal amount. The questions came from the floor. "How do we know you'll get paid back?" And we said, well, finally we said, "we'll do it ourselves." We will, what the plaques go for, \$200? [00:46:40][55.3]

Janet Ness: [00:46:41] \$200, yeah. [00:46:41][0.1]

Lee Ness: [00:46:41] Two of us bought plaques before we ordered them. We each put in \$200 into the kitty. That enabled us to get some printing going and what have you. And then people started buying and at that point we could order the plaques. So, you know, the Citizens Association was instrumental in getting the survey done, but once that was done, they got cold feet and they didn't want to sink any money into it. And, so several of us got together and we said, 'well, all right, we'll do it ourselves.' And we did. [00:47:23][41.5]

Kerry James Reed: [00:47:25] So how did you guys come to be involved with the Citizens Association? [00:47:28][2.6]

Lee Ness: [00:47:30] I have no idea. [00:47:30][0.5]

Janet Ness: [00:47:31] I mean, we joined when we moved here. I think it was one of our neighbors introduced us, said we should go to a meeting. But, you know, that was the way to find out what was going on in the neighborhood. [00:47:46][15.3]

Lee Ness: [00:47:48] Yeah, in the absence of internet or anything like that, if you wanted to know what was going on in the neighborhood, that's where you went. You'd go to the Citizens Association and the, the people who are opening up Evening Star Restaurant would come and make a pitch and say, here's what we'd like you to support us before the city and here's what we're going to do. That's how you did it. So, yeah, it was just really the only way to get information. [00:48:22][34.4]

Janet Ness: [00:48:25] And you got to meet your neighbors as well, which was good. [00:48:29][4.6]

Kerry James Reed: [00:48:30] So what did you guys think of the survey in '91? I think it was when the Virginia Tech students went around and sort of laid the groundwork for this becoming a historic district. What did you guys think of that process? [00:48:46][15.9]

Lee Ness: [00:48:47] We didn't have much to do with that. [00:48:48][1.1]

Kerry James Reed: [00:48:48] Really? [00:48:48][0.0]

Lee Ness: [00:48:49] No, that was the Citizens Association doing it. The showrunner was Susan Escherich, who was a local resident and who also worked for the National Park Service. So she was able to run that thing through. So we didn't get fully involved in that until the late 90s when people started talking about, "gee, do we want to start doing plaques like they do in Old Town?" The idea being that if people put plaques up, they wouldn't demolish their house. [00:49:25][36.7]

Janet Ness: [00:49:28] And have some pride in their home. [00:49:30][2.3]

Kerry James Reed: [00:49:34] So, you mentioned, the Evening Star restaurant a couple of minutes ago. When did you start seeing a real, boom in commercial development along Mount Vernon Ave? When did that start to occur? [00:49:52][18.4]

Lee Ness: [00:49:52] Well, the renaissance was... [00:49:54][1.2]

Janet Ness: [00:49:56] It was gradual, wasn't it? [00:49:57][1.4]

Lee Ness: [00:49:57] Well, it was gradual, and it was stop and go. Periodically, antique and pseudo-antique shops would pop up, but they never got enough of them that they could actually get people coming in. You need a certain mass of these sort of stores. People aren't going to travel any distance to go to one antique store. You need four or five of them. And they never got that. They got four or five antique stores, but never at one time, they were sequential. And as to restaurants, the early ones didn't do all that well. Thai Peppers had the Snack Bar upstairs and the food was dreadful. I went there once, the only clients I saw ever up there were the firemen from the station a block away. They'd go up there once in a while. And that was just about it. You had your choice of, early on you could go to Mac's place or later on there was the Snack Bar. And then in about 1998, maybe, you had St. Elmo's opening, the coffee shop, and the Evening Star. And both of those were, by Del Ray standards, up market. And that was really the turning point commercially. The residential market had already taken off at that point, and the restauranteurs were looking around and they say, you know, Del Ray has people with disposable income. Let's see if we can help them out. [00:51:54][117.1]

Kerry James Reed: [00:51:57] Do you think the increase in social spaces along the commercial corridor has had a big impact on your emotional relationship to Del Ray? [00:52:09][12.0]

Lee Ness: [00:52:10] I'm not sure what you mean. [00:52:11][1.0]

Kerry James Reed: [00:52:11] So like before, you mentioned that, you know, there was Mac's place and there was like an electrician and so on and so forth. So, how is your perspective of Del Ray, I guess, changed then? Since that when that infrastructure was here as opposed to what's there now? [00:52:28][16.5]

Lee Ness: [00:52:29] Well, what was there then were shops that catered to lower middle class. Cotton's TV repair. Now of course, in the 1950s and 60s, you could repair televisions. I did it as

a child. You'd pull all the tubes out of the television, bicycle down to the hardware store, test the tubes one at a time, find the one that was bad, then bicycle back and put them all back in again using the guide. And you'd fix the television and everybody would be suitably impressed. But of course, with solid state televisions, you can't do that. So after a while, the television repair place, they were only servicing people who didn't have a whole lot of money who are still using tube televisions and radios. And yeah, there were places like that you'd walk down and it was clearly lower and lower middle class oriented. And that is not the case now. Now they're counting on people who can spend, you know, 30 bucks to have their nails done. Is that right, 30 bucks? [00:53:49][79.8]

Janet Ness: [00:53:50] I don't know. [00:53:50][0.3]

Lee Ness: [00:53:52] I have no idea, but whatever it is, it's more than it's worth. You have, not only the nails, you have hair, you have a French bistro now. Very nice, very nice, but not cheap. And so it's all much more upmarket than it was. I don't know when the last gas station went. When did that rip-off Exxon station go? Maybe ten years ago? 15 years ago? [00:54:30][38.3]

Janet Ness: [00:54:30] I would say 15. [00:54:31][0.3]

Lee Ness: [00:54:31] Fifteen. We had a gas station at, Oxford and Mount Vernon, famous for padding repair bills. And they weren't even artistic about it. That was my main complaint. They were just flat out upfront about it. And it was dirty, and so that went about 15 years ago. And since then it's been mostly the more or less somewhat upmarket. You know, not real, not Rodeo Drive, but you know, it's geared towards people who have some disposable income. [00:55:15][44.0]

Kerry James Reed: [00:55:20] How would you say that changes in the sort of commercial infrastructure like, you know, St. Elmo's opening up or a business coming in and out of the bank compares to the changes in the residential side, because, you know, we have a tendency to see like changes in the commercial development, like, that's a really good thing, right? But when it comes to the historical integrity of the home, we perceive that as bad. I guess what separates the two? I know there's... [00:55:51][30.8]

Lee Ness: [00:55:53] I'm not sure they are separated. I was thrilled to see what was called the old bank building when we moved here. Everybody knew what the old bank building referred to. [00:56:05][12.2]

Janet Ness: [00:56:05] Which was occupied by pigeons. [00:56:06][1.0]

Lee Ness: [00:56:07] Yes. It had been a bank for six months in 1924. That was its total. That was the sum total of its history as a bank. But it looked like a bank. And even though a once in a while a real estate firm would move in or something else, for the most part, it was abandoned. But people still called the old bank building because by God, it just looks like a bank. And I was so thrilled when a bank actually moved in and painted it up and restored the windows. Oh, it's

beautiful now, but it's the original bank building. That thrills me no end. The Palladian building, it's, you know, they rebuilt it after a fire in 1944, it's close to original. You know, I like it when they when they take an existing building and repurpose it commercially. I did not cry when the gas station went. [00:57:18][71.3]

Kerry James Reed: [00:57:21] Right. [00:57:21][0.0]

Lee Ness: [00:57:22] No architectural value at all. [00:57:24][1.9]

Kerry James Reed: [00:57:27] So returning to the plaque system, a little bit, that designation of historic homes around Del Ray. How has that program developed since you started it in the early 2000? [00:57:39][12.5]

Janet Ness: [00:57:41] When it first started there was a lot of interest and, you know, because it was so brand new and people wanted to be part of it. Some owners were a little dubious because they thought it would impose restrictions on what they could do to their home. Like the B.A.R. down in Old Town and Parker-Gray. But, you know, we told them that wasn't the case. And, of course, now, as time has passed, we've, you know, basically met the demand for them. You know, there's I would say there's about 30, 40% of the historic buildings left that haven't got plaques. I get about two inquiries a year, 2 or 3 inquiries a year, but that's it. And you know, there's a limit to what we can sell. [00:58:49][68.9]

Kerry James Reed: [00:58:50] Right. [00:58:50][0.0]

Janet Ness: [00:58:51] Because, you know, the initial thrust that's gone past and, you know, a lot of the people who were really interested, they've got the plaques and either they're still in the same house or they've sold it. And I don't know whether the new owners have kept the plaques or not. It's a lot of work to walk around and check on houses to see whether they still have the plaques or not, you know? I mean, they're supposed to display them, that was part of the deal. But, you know, people wanted to use them as trivets and things like that. So, you know, you really can't dictate to people what to do with them. But I don't think it's as people say, it is so important now, you know, and of it's likely said, you know, people when you're younger, you're busy with your families and your career and everything else. So, there just isn't the interest or, you know, I can't sell to many more people. [01:00:05][73.5]

Kerry James Reed: [01:00:05] Right. [01:00:05][0.0]

Janet Ness: [01:00:06] Because there's a limit of number of buildings. And as they keep being developed, then you know, your house isn't a contributing structure anymore. [01:00:15][9.3]

Kerry James Reed: [01:00:18] So out of the 600 or so odd contributing structures that were on the survey in '91, do you know how many have plaques or how many you gave out? [01:00:28][9.5]

Janet Ness: [01:00:29] I've sold 140 plaques, but there's a whole bunch that don't qualify anymore. [01:00:38][8.6]

Kerry James Reed: [01:00:38] Right. [01:00:38][0.0]

Janet Ness: [01:00:40] So I would say there's only about 30 or 40% that do qualify now. And it's going to diminish as time goes on. So, I mean, I'm not quite sure where we go from here. But, I mean, we did at one time do walking tours where there were plaqued houses, but, you know, not anymore. And times have changed, you know? Plus, the demographics have changed. And Covid also upset a whole lot of things. And that's about it, really. [01:01:18][38.5]

Kerry James Reed: [01:01:23] So Lee, how do you think the public displays the plaques, uh, along Mount Vernon and the plaques on people's homes does it, you believe, affect people's understanding of the district? So when you talk with your neighbors or, you know you're down at St. Elmo's having a coffee, and if a conversation were to come up, hypothetically, how much do you think the average person in Del Ray is aware of the historical nature of their neighborhood? [01:01:53][30.1]

Lee Ness: [01:01:54] I think a fair amount of them know. But I think most aren't particularly concerned with it. Last year I was down the street where a perfectly good old bungalow was being torn down, bulldozed to make room for a McMansion. And I got to talking to the owner. He was there, and he asked me where I live, and I said, I told him, he said, "oh, you're in that historic house," because we have two plaques out front. And I bit my tongue and I just said "yes." And I mean, the inner me was screaming, 'all houses are historic if you just leave the blank alone,' but I didn't. And so, you know, people do notice them, and we have had, somebody else on, I don't know, that was an email group or Nextdoor or whatever referred to our house, they said, "well, they're, right across the street from the historic house," meaning ours, because we have two plaques out front and people notice that. And the house looks old and it's visibly an old house. So those things people do notice. [01:03:28][94.0]

Janet Ness: [01:03:29] Well, it depends how close to the sidewalk you are, because we are very close to the sidewalk, and we have a lot of foot traffic going down to St Elmo's. But if, you know, you've got long front yards, then people wouldn't necessarily see it. [01:03:44][15.2]

Lee Ness: [01:03:46] Most of the houses here are 15 feet back from the sidewalk. That was the rule in the town of Potomac. And it's still the rule in the city of Alexandria. And so if you stand on our porch and look down, all the older houses start, either the house itself or the porch, starts right down the line. You can see right down the line, and you can see that in many other places, because that was the rule. You could go up to 15 feet from the sidewalk. And so everybody of course built 15 feet from the sidewalk. So it is visible. And about seven or eight years ago, we managed to get the city to put historic district signs up. "You are now entering the historic district," which is nice. It adds confusion because the historic district has such a very strange shape. You are now entering, you are now leaving, you are now entering, you're

now leaving again, etc.. So, they did put it up. I don't know how much people actually pay attention to it. [01:05:00][73.2]

Kerry James Reed: [01:05:04] Are you pleased that you guys are known as the historic house? [01:05:07][2.6]

Lee Ness: [01:05:08] I mean, I guess so. [01:05:09][0.6]

Kerry James Reed: [01:05:09] Yeah, that's pretty cool. [01:05:10][0.8]

Lee Ness: [01:05:11] We've put a lot of work into it, so I'm happy that people recognize it. We do get compliments on the house. People say, 'oh, it's such a beautiful house,' etc. So I'm not sure if they associate it with being old, but they say, 'oh, it's such a beautiful house.' [01:05:28][17.4]

Janet Ness: [01:05:29] Well, some people notice the windows because of the wavy glass. We still have all the original windows and most of the glass. [01:05:36][7.2]

Lee Ness: [01:05:37] Yeah. So it does get noticed. And that's nice, after all the work we put into it, it's rewarding. I don't know where it would go from there. [01:05:51][14.3]

Kerry James Reed: [01:05:58] So you mentioned previously the, negative might be too strong of a word, but there's certain connotations people had of Del Ray. When you all first, first moved into the neighborhood. Could you describe what some of those were? [01:06:13][15.6]

Lee Ness: [01:06:15] It was the perception in the in the 50s and 60s was that it was a redneck enclave. And back when we first moved in here, there was a family across the street. They had a daughter, couple with a daughter. And the guy recounted how he had met somebody. And, uh, "where do you live?" "I live in Del Ray." And this other guy said, "oh, wow, that's where we go to get lucky, because all the girls there, you pay them and they're yours. It's one big red light district. "And our neighbor said, "excuse me, we have a teenage daughter." "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know." But that was the perception. [01:07:14][59.5]

Janet Ness: [01:07:16] We never saw it. [01:07:17][0.8]

Lee Ness: [01:07:18] No, we never saw anything like that. But that was the perception. There was that the other perception, like I said, it was a redneck bar, a redneck area where you'd have, you know, bonfires out back and everybody's drinking beer and what have you, Western music playing on their radios and what have you. And, that was the perception of it. Now there is a Facebook group, 'Growing up in Del Ray,' and those people swear it was heaven. Of course, everybody knew everybody else. So yeah, it's all relative. [01:08:02][44.9]

Kerry James Reed: [01:08:04] Mhm. So how would you say the connotation has changed? So up until now, then? Like now, when, you know, people find out that you guys live in Del Ray,

what are some things that they say? Oh, that's where we go to eat or, what are those conversations like? [01:08:23][18.9]

Lee Ness: [01:08:23] Usually it's just, 'Oh, that's very nice.' You know, it's a nice neighborhood. [01:08:27][3.1]

Janet Ness: [01:08:27] A great neighborhood, yeah. You know, wish they could live there and so on. [01:08:32][4.3]

Lee Ness: [01:08:36] Once in a while, they'll say, 'oh, yeah, we go there for meals.' But for the most part, it's just, oh, what a great neighborhood, you know? It's quiet and relatively crime free and, you know, not pretentious. [01:08:52][15.5]

Janet Ness: [01:08:56] And it's very convenient, you know, for getting into DC and Old Town. [01:09:00][4.0]

Lee Ness: [01:09:01] And for what you need. We can, within a four block walk we've got a public library, we've got a post office, we've got a UPS store, we've got our pharmacy, we've got a hardware store, we've got a 7-Eleven, we've got a butcher shop, we've got a cheese shop, we've got God only knows how many restaurants. You know, we can, UPS store, it's wonderful. We can get everything we want except a supermarket by walking and, you know, that's just wonderful. [01:09:39][38.6]

Janet Ness: [01:09:41] Yeah, there's a farmer's market on a Saturday. [01:09:42][1.8]

Lee Ness: [01:09:43] There's a farmer's market in the parking lot, and it's really nice. The school, of course, the elementary school is in walking distance, is two blocks that way. [01:09:55][12.7]

Janet Ness: [01:10:00] It's a very walkable area and that's why people like it. I think they come to realize that, you know, you don't have to be attached to your car, that you can walk to things very easily, and it makes life easy. I mean, we have neighbors who used to have to drive their kids to school, and they've stopped doing that now, and they walk them to school. And that's such a big improvement in their lives. [01:10:29][28.9]

Kerry James Reed: [01:10:30] Yeah, absolutely. [01:10:31][0.2]

Janet Ness: [01:10:31] You know, that's what attracts a lot of people. [01:10:34][2.9]

Kerry James Reed: [01:10:38] All right. Well. We've been speaking now for an hour and ten minutes, so this has been absolutely fabulous, thank you guys so much. Before we start to wrap up, are there any questions that we didn't touch on that y'all would like to speak on? I was going to ask you, Lee, a little bit more about how you came to learn so much about the Town of Potomac, would you like to elaborate on that? What that process looked like? [01:11:03][24.7]

Lee Ness: [01:11:04] That was just, fortunately we now have the internet. Which means that I can go into primary, and what do you academics call newspapers? Semi-primary? [01:11:20][15.6]

Kerry James Reed: [01:11:20] So there are the primary sources, and then there's secondary sources. [01:11:23][2.6]

Lee Ness: [01:11:23] Yeah, but what is a contemporary newspaper? [01:11:25][1.7]

Kerry James Reed: [01:11:27] Contemporary as in from 1890? [01:11:28][1.1]

Lee Ness: [01:11:29] Yes, if I want... [01:11:29][0.6]

Kerry James Reed: [01:11:31] That's a primary source. [01:11:32][1.0]

Lee Ness: [01:11:33] That's a primary source. Even though the person who's writing it was has no better information about it than... [01:11:36][3.7]

Kerry James Reed: [01:11:38] Well, you're getting actually into some very interesting territory. [Lee and Janet laugh] So I think about it is if it's... [01:11:44][5.7]

Lee Ness: [01:11:45] Contemporaneous. [01:11:45][0.0]

Kerry James Reed: [01:11:47] Yeah, contemporaneous and you're getting pretty close. Now you have to apply scrutiny if, you know, like past certain point, like if someone's writing about Del Ray in New York you can't say he's the primary source about Del Ray. It's a primary source about what somebody in New York thinks about Del Ray. [01:12:03][15.7]

Lee Ness: [01:12:04] When I say primary source, I mean, the land title documents, those are primarily. The tax rolls that were done at the time, those are primary. I use newspapers because the Library of Virginia and the Library of Congress, as I'm sure you know, have digitized large numbers of newspapers and you can search them. So, you know, I have the newspapers, I have the tax rolls, I can do chain of title. The City of Alexandria and County of Fairfax will both give me access to their digitized, land records for \$50 a month. And as long as I space it out my initial investment, \$600 a year, I'll never sell that back home. For each of them, that's \$1,200 a year. I said no, no, no, that's not gonna fly. But for \$50 a month, I can, if I do it twice a year, I'm all right. But with the internet, I can do that. So it's a whole lot easier now than it was when I first started back in 90, back in 89, when I had to get in my car and drive to the Arlington County Courthouse and manually go through their printed documents. [01:13:34][89.8]

Janet Ness: [01:13:36] Didn't have a storage facility or something? [01:13:38][1.8]

Lee Ness: [01:13:39] Oh, God. Oh, that's a that's a terrible story. It's a heartbreaking story. [01:13:42][3.7]

Janet Ness: [01:13:43] Yes. [01:13:43][0.0]

Lee Ness: [01:13:43] They had tax records and they didn't know what to do with them. So they put them in the basement of an abandoned office building across the street. And I went to them and I said, "can you tell me about the tax records?" Because they're fabulous. Who owns what lots and how much they're worth, that's wonderful stuff. And the court clerk took me across the street. He opened the door and there were metal shelves in this basement, musty basement of an abandoned office building. And he said, "there they are." He said, "I think they're at the back. Turn off the lights when you leave." And I said, "oh, all right." This was before digital cameras, so all I could do was take notes. I wish I had a digital camera, I would have photographed them all. That's what I do down at the Library of Virginia. But I didn't. And, when I went back, several years later, they said, "oh, no, we don't have them. We never had them. You must have been dreaming or something." I said, "oh well, whatever." I pursued it, "I said, can you please verify?" And they came back and gave me a document that said, 'here's proof that we sent them down to LVA.' And I looked at it and I said, "that's dated 1985. I visited them in your abandoned office building in 1989. You did not send them down." "Well, I don't know that, blah, blah." So basically somebody got tired of them and they put them in a dumpster. Which is sad, but in any event it's, you know, now it's a lot easier. Now I can do 90% of my work sitting up in my office at my computer, and, you know, that just makes it so much easier. [01:15:46][122.4]

Kerry James Reed: [01:15:48] How does it affect your, you know, relationship with your neighborhood to learn so much about it online? Like, is there, you know, for me, when I learn something new about my field of study, I always have a newfound appreciation for it. You know, I don't mean to insert what I go through onto you, but do you experience something similar? Or, you know, when you're doing the research and you're learning about your neighborhood, how does that make you feel? [01:16:10][22.4]

Lee Ness: [01:16:11] I don't have the excitement level that I do when I do military research at the National Archives, that I find truly fascinating. There isn't a day, I've spent hundreds of days in the National Archives and there hasn't been one of them, where I haven't sat up my seat and said, "boy, I didn't know that. That's really cool." Might not be anything that's relevant to what I'm doing, but I always go 'wow, that is really cool.' For the most part, the history of Del Ray is pretty straightforward. A sold his property to B, who sold it to C, who defaulted on their mortgage and C.S. Taylor Burke came in and sold it to person D, and it goes on and on like that. It's fairly straightforward. Once in a while you get something a little out of the ordinary, and you have to be careful. I have my website and I put history of houses up there. And there was one house where a neighbor had come into the house and he found his wife and the man of the house being very friendly. And he shot and killed the owner of the house. So upstairs, right outside the bedroom. So, before I posted anything like that on the website, I emailed the owner of the house who was an acquaintance of ours and I said, "here's the story." I said, "there was a murder in your house right outside your bedroom in the hall." I said, "an enraged husband found his wife with the blah, blah, blah." I said, "if you want me to leave that out of the history of your house, I certainly will." And she said, "that is the coolest thing I've ever

heard." She said, "please put it in." So I did. There are others where a house was set on fire to hide what was apparently the murder of a young child. That I did not put it in. So, you know, you do get these interesting things once in a while, but for the most part, it's fairly straightforward. You get the developers who went bust during the housing bubble when that burst in 1927, the housing bubble surprisingly burst two years before the Great Depression of 29. People should have seen it coming, and they didn't. But the housing market collapsed in 1927, and that was two years before the great, the stock market crash of 29. And so there were developers who lost their shirt. The Bensons, Frank and Verna Benson, were the most prominent. They put up houses all over the place, leveraged to the hilt, and had to go bankrupt. And they sold the houses partially completed. It's sort of interesting in that perspective. The banks are interesting. We had two banks, the Bank of Del Ray and Potomac Savings. And Potomac Savings had a nice big building over there, and they sunk all their money into putting up a nice building. And then they went bust six months later while the Bank of Del Ray was operating out of a desk in a pharmacy to save money. So there are some interesting things. For the most part, it's largely mechanical. And you see the same names over and over again in the 1920s because there were four or five big families and they intermarried. It's sort of interesting. You say, wait a minute, that was his, this guy's sister married this guy over here. And there were five or six big families, and they intermarried and they kept the money within themselves. Naturally. [01:21:01][290.0]

Kerry James Reed: [01:21:02] Naturally, as they are wont to do. [01:21:02][0.1]

Lee Ness: [01:21:03] As they are wont to do. Yes. [01:21:04][0.9]

Kerry James Reed: [01:21:06] So, Janet, one of the most interesting things I think about your perspective of Del Ray is coming from England, where there's, you know, historic structures, historic buildings that go that go back thousands of years, right, centuries. And you mentioned earlier that, at least, you know, going to, you know, Saint Virgin Mary's church I think you said? [01:21:30][24.0]

Janet Ness: [01:21:30] St Mary, the Virgin. [01:21:31][0.6]

Kerry James Reed: [01:21:31] St. Mary the Virgin. Excuse me. And, you know, Lord Nelson's seat and whatnot that was, you know, commonplace. People didn't really think about it that much. So are you surprised at the sort of American fixation on some of our old history, at least around here in the structures and things like that? Does that attitude surprise you at all? [01:21:55][23.9]

Janet Ness: [01:21:58] I don't think that Americans appreciate what they have, the history I mean. There's, I mean, a lot of them are going over to England, to London, and seeing the structures and all the tourist places over there. And, you know, there's a lot here on your doorstep. But people, because it's not as old as the stuff in the UK and Europe, I think they tend to ignore it a bit. I mean, it is fascinating and that. But I never went through the American education system, so I don't know what they teach in schools here. [01:22:43][45.3]

Kerry James Reed: [01:22:43] Lucky you. [Janet laughs] [01:22:44][0.4]

Janet Ness: [01:22:46] But, you know, do they teach history, you know, to the extent. I mean, I remember being with some friends once, and they could recite the kings, the queens of England. I can't, because we didn't learn that in history. You know, that wasn't so important. [01:23:05][19.5]

Lee Ness: [01:23:08] And there's, it's not really comparable. You know, the saying that the United States is a country where a hundred years is real history, and England is the place where 100 miles is a great distance. So it's relative to what you're used to. You know, we do have historic structures here. We're getting to the point where there are some legitimately old structures. If you go to, well, in Old Town. There are places in D.C. and Richmond and what have you. There's a famous British military historian, John Keegan. And he had done a sabbatical at Princeton University for a year, and he recounted that people were always saying to him: oh, all our new houses over here must be quite a shock to you, you being used to all that history and everything. And he said, "I didn't have the heart to tell them that the house I'm staying in in Princeton is older than the house I had in the UK." You know, he was staying in a house from, you know, the early 1800s. So, yeah, we're getting to the point now where there is some history. I'm not sure how much people care about it or they, you know, they just walk right by it. I was giving a talk in London once and, it was up from King's Cross, and I had to walk from the hotel to where I was giving the speech, and I passed the shell of a church. Just the walls, three of the walls. The rest were collapsed. The tower was half collapsed, just completely ruined and burned out. And there was a sign there saying that it had been destroyed in the Blitz and that they made a conscious effort to leave it that way. So that you could see the ruined church right in London. You walk along and there's a ruined church, big huge structure. And they made the decision to leave it there. Leave it that way. And that was something that really grabs you. [01:25:55][167.7]

Kerry James Reed: [01:25:56] Yeah. [01:25:56][0.0]

Lee Ness: [01:25:56] You're walking along, and office buildings and everything else, the cars and all of them. Oh my God, what's this? And that grabs you. And I can't think of anything around here that does that. I don't know. [01:26:15][18.1]

Kerry James Reed: [01:26:17] So then, you know... [01:26:18][0.9]

Lee Ness: [01:26:19] I'm not advocating demolishing buildings just to have that, no. [01:26:23][3.9]

Kerry James Reed: [01:26:24] But, you know, you say that and a understanding of the history of a neighborhood, of a place is crucial for its legacy almost, would that be fair to say? [01:26:36][11.9]

Lee Ness: [01:26:39] Yes. [01:26:39][0.0]

Kerry James Reed: [01:26:39] Ok. Well, this has been amazing. We've been talking for almost an hour and a half. [01:26:42][3.6]

Lee Ness: [01:26:43] Ok. One other thing about the plaques, which is that, changes to a building are often incremental. And the problem then is at what point do you say you're not eligible for a plaque anymore? You've changed too much. Now in Old Town and Parker Gray, the B.A.R. is really strict. I mean, they don't allow windows unless they're wood windows, true divided light, the whole bit. The colors have to be right, everything has to be exactly right. And the Historic Alexandria Foundation, which hands out the plaques that you see in Old Town, they have adopted the B.A.R. standards. Well, they want to, H.A.F. wants to, start doing plaques elsewhere in Alexandria. And I walked around Del Ray and we're the only house that would meet their criteria. [01:27:55][72.0]

Kerry James Reed: [01:27:56] Mhmm. [01:27:56][0.0]

Lee Ness: [01:27:58] Because almost everybody else has put in vinyl windows, just for a start. And vinyl windows don't cut it. [01:28:06][7.9]

Kerry James Reed: [01:28:07] Mhmm. [01:28:07][0.0]

Lee Ness: [01:28:08] We kept our wood windows and we kept the original siding. And so we have the H.A.F. plaque out there, but we, to my knowledge, were the only building outside Old Town and Parker Gray that has one. Because everybody else, vinyl windows, sure, put an extension at the back, most people do that. You know, for our plaques, we are a lot more lenient. We have to be. Otherwise we'd be the only ones with a plaque. But even there, it's oftentimes a real problem deciding, have they gone too far? And it's a tough call. So when somebody says, you know how many houses, that had been contributing in 1990, do you think are no longer contributing? Well, I don't know. Depends on where you draw the line. [01:29:14][66.1]

Kerry James Reed: [01:29:18] So would you want B.A.R oversight then? Is that something that you would want for Del Ray? [01:29:22][3.9]

Lee Ness: [01:29:23] The neighbors would kill me. [01:29:24][1.4]

Kerry James Reed: [01:29:25] Yeah. [01:29:25][0.0]

Lee Ness: [01:29:28] Because they have, their lots right now have bulldozer value. A house that would ordinarily go for not much money now, two three years ago tear downs in Del Ray were starting at 600. Starting at 600. There are now probably around 750, something like that, for a tear down. And if you're a homeowner, you're thinking to yourself, boy, if there was a B.A.R, I wouldn't get 750 for my house, I'd be back down to that 550. Because nobody wants a 1500 foot bungalow. The rich folk don't want it, that's for sure. So for a lot of people, their house is their retirement, of course, it's where they have their money. And if somebody were to come in

and say, 'well, gee, you know, we're not going to let anybody make any changes to your house.' Their house values are going to drop because they don't have the bulldozer value anymore. You know, it is a nonstarter. Periodically, people say, the true believers will say, 'you know, wouldn't it be great if?' I said, 'well, you know, if it had been done back in 1990, you may have had enough support in the community.' In 1990, the people moving in were satisfied to put a new coat of paint on the house. They redid the landscaping. You know, they put up the white picket fence. You know, they made those basic cosmetic, they improved the house, restored it. [01:31:24][116.2]

Janet Ness: [01:31:25] Or just updated the bathroom or something. [01:31:27][1.7]

Lee Ness: [01:31:28] Yeah. Well, yeah. The bathroom, the kitchen, what have you. That's not the case now. So if somebody, you know, you gotta, in order to get a B.A.R. type regime, you've got to get a majority of the people in the affected area. Right now if 10% voted for a B.A.R., I'd be surprised. Because, you know, I have said to one of our local entrepreneurs who's very knowledgeable about the area. I said, "you know, we're considering maybe putting an easement on our house that it can't be changed, an exterior easement." And he said, "boy, you really do care about preservation, don't you?" I said, "yeah." He said, "because you're going to be taking 200 or \$300,000 off the value of your house." If somebody can't put it in, make any changes to it, they're not going to pay money for it. If they can't expand it, if they can't tear it down. He said, "boy, that's real dedication on your part, 200 and \$300,000 loss on your house." And at that point, I started reconsidering putting an easement on the house. But that's the effect it would have on all of the houses around here. And I don't want to go in front of those people and explain to them why their house is now worth \$200,000, they have \$200,000 or less equity in the house than they thought they had. And they want they're looking to retire in ten years. I wouldn't want to face them and explain that to them. If it had been done back in 1990 or earlier it might have worked. And then you would have, those bungalows that were still going for an affordable price, because the rich folk don't want 1500 square foot bungalows. So, yeah, that is my thinking on that. [01:33:37][129.1]

Kerry James Reed: [01:33:40] Thank you so much. That was definitely crucial, considering what, you know, Rod and everybody else is doing right now. [01:33:45][5.7]

Lee Ness: [01:33:46] Rod is one of the people who's thinking of B.A.R. He's hot on the B.A.R. I wasn't going to mention any names, but he is one of the B.A.R people. Although he does realize that a strict B.A.R., I think he realizes that it wouldn't fly. You can't just go into somebody's personal life and take \$300,000 of money from them. [01:34:13][27.2]

Kerry James Reed: [01:34:15] Take their agency, yeah. [01:34:15][0.4]

Lee Ness: [01:34:15] Yeah, and we'll just take a \$300,000 of your savings and take it away. I told Walter, if you tried to do that, I said the people will be marching in your house with pitchforks and torches, and the realtors would have your head on a pike on Mount Vernon Avenue. [01:34:37][22.4]

Janet Ness: [01:34:40] I hope you're cutting out that bit [laughs]. [01:34:42][2.2]

Kerry James Reed: [01:34:42] I can, absolutely, it's not a problem at all. [01:34:44][1.8]

Lee Ness: [01:34:46] Yeah. Cut out a bit about Rod, he's family to you, so. [01:34:50][3.4]

Kerry James Reed: [01:34:50] Yeah, absolutely. Ok, we can move on to the closing question now. So we've been talking for an hour and 35 minutes, this has been absolute pleasure. So last question I have for both of you, and I'll start with you, Janet, is what are some hopes that you have for the future of Del Ray? Besides for the value of your own home staying up. [01:35:12][22.2]

Janet Ness: [01:35:16] [laughs] I think I would like to see more, different stores on the avenue. Unfortunately, people that, you know, they say it's where the high street exists. Well, it does and it doesn't, you know, it's more restaurants and things like that. And, you know, people say, oh, they want all these different sorts of stores, but then if the store comes, they'll go and shop at target or online and not use the store. And it's very hard for a small store other than a restaurant or a coffee shop to make it on the avenue. So, I would hope that people would use those types of stores more, but I don't know. You know, it's so easy to order online. And I mean, we're guilty of it as well. But if I can buy on the avenue, I do. And I hope that some people have pride in living here. But you know, you can't dictate to people. But I hope it thrives. I'd like to see it continue to thrive. [01:36:39][83.8]

Kerry James Reed: [01:36:40] Absolutely. And for you, Lee? What are some hopes you have for the future of Del Ray? [01:36:45][4.8]

Lee Ness: [01:36:48] I don't really have any. We're being squeezed in terms of residential between the rich who come in with their bulldozers and tear down existing houses that are perfectly fine, the three bedroom, two bath houses, but they don't have media rooms and they don't have this, that and the other. So they get torn down to be replaced by \$2 million McMansions. That's one end of the spectrum. The other is the city, of course, wants more affordable housing. So what they want to see happen is more dense housing. They have put out a paper that says, you know, single family housing is inherently racist and regressive and they don't like single family homes, and they'd like to see them phased out with a little bit of nudging to help them along. So from the perspective of the residential areas, I don't see any hope for it. I saw zoning for housing coming along where they want to densify Del Ray and I don't like it, but the alternative is McMansions. It's going to be one or the other, and I, you know, people move in here and they say, 'oh, it's a wonderful neighborhood,' after putting up their big house. And I want to say, 'why do you think it's wonderful?' I can't see any reason why they would think that, except for a convenience to DC. I really don't know. And as for the shops, it's going to be developed. We're going to lose, I suspect, most of the small shops, to the extent we have them now. Developers keep eyeing these strips of shops, and, you know, boy, can we take that out and put it in a big store like they did down on, uh, Mount Vernon and Monroe, where Walgreens moved in, and blew away, was it three or four small stores? [01:39:18][150.2]

Janet Ness: [01:39:18] It was at least four. [01:39:19][0.6]

Lee Ness: [01:39:20] There was a fishing tackle and bait shop, and there was, you know, assorted small shops. And they moved in and they blew it all down and put it up a big Walgreens. I'm not sure we needed a big Walgreens. We have a CVS that's fairly close. But I can see that happening. And when that point has been raised to city planners, they say, 'oh, don't worry about it.' The ownership is so dispersed that it's very hard to assemble a package where somebody could do that, and I disagree. Obviously the Salvation Army owns a huge plot of land, and they're selling off two of their houses, and it's going to occur to them sooner or later, they're sitting on a gold mine. And they could sell that and do a lot of social good with that money. And there's Ray Mahmood owns strips of buildings along Mount Vernon Avenue. He's a huge property owner in Del Ray on Mount Vernon Avenue, and he could sell a whole bunch of contiguous lots. So I'm not certain that it's going to get any better, except if you want, if you like rich people. And I'm sort of on the fence about that. I really don't care. Or, you know, if you want the restaurants and shops that service the rich people. And once again, they're going to be expensive, which is going to be out of our budget. So, you know, I don't have high hopes for it, frankly. If I was 20 years old, that would drive me to distraction, thinking about, oh, what am I going to do 50 years from now? Well, I'm not 20 years old and I don't have to worry about 50 years from now. So, you know, it's something that I get unhappy about if I think about it. But I don't often I think about it. I just charge straight ahead. I do my history of Del Ray. I put it up on the website. I try and get people involved. I want people to understand it. I'm trying to use the power of persuasion, a soft persuasion. So that when somebody goes to buy a house, they can go on my website and say, oh, look, this house is in 1923. And it was, you know, Bill and Susie Murphy, who lived there with their kids, you know, and all of a sudden that humanizes it. It's not just a house. It's Bill and Susie Murphy's house. [01:42:29][189.4]

Kerry James Reed: [01:42:29] Right. [01:42:29][0.0]

Lee Ness: [01:42:30] Actual people who lived there. And so I work on that with remarkably little success, but I keep plugging away at it. I'm stubborn. [01:42:42][12.0]

Kerry James Reed: [01:42:46] Well, I want to thank both of you for agreeing to do this. This has been an absolute pleasure and extremely informative. So yeah, Lee, Janet, thank you guys so much. [01:42:55][8.2]

Lee Ness: [01:42:55] You're certainly welcome. [01:42:56][0.4]

Janet Ness: [01:42:56] Thank you. [01:42:56][0.0]

[5788.1]