

Officers Row Memories Oral History Project

Julie Garver

Project Role: Intern and Project Manager



Interviewed November 4, 2024 at the Marshall House, Vancouver, Washington, by Madeline Hagan, historian with Historical Research Associates

This interview transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity. To view the entire interview on YouTube, [click here](#).

Madeline Hagan: I am interviewing Julie Garver. Julie, would you please introduce yourself?

JG: My name's Julie Garver. I am a native of Clark County, born just a few miles from here at Vancouver Memorial Hospital.

MH: How did you get involved with Officers Row?

JG: I was attending Clark College and studying accounting in the mid-1980s. There was a posting on the jobs board about an intern that the City of Vancouver needed for the Officers Row project. I had good memories of Officers Row from childhood so I thought this would be fascinating.

MH: You mentioned childhood memories of the Row. Can you expand on that?

JG: My mother, Joyce Garver, was an art teacher at Camas High School for many years. She really liked to expose her students to all different kinds of art experiences, and she felt that architecture was an art experience. One of the field trips was to Officers Row. She would point out the different styles to us that were all embodied in Officers Row. Even earlier in childhood, we would always drive down Officers Row. She would point the houses out to us kids and say what happened there.

MH: What did you anticipate doing in your first few months on the job?

JG: I knew I'd be working with the developer Will Macht. It turned out that he was a very good debater. We would have long debates. I was a twenty-year-old kid at the time. It was nice that he took the time to debate with me. I'd say, "These should be affordable housing!"

And he'd say, "These cannot be affordable housing!"

And I said again, "These should be affordable housing!"

Then he said, "They can't be affordable housing because of the economics." There was a lot of interesting discussion about what Officers Row should be in the future. It had been quasi-affordable housing because the Veterans Administration had been renting it out, and they'd been dealing with leaky pipes and drafty buildings. The houses were big, but they were cheap because people had to put up with some stuff.

One of my jobs was interacting with the tenants that were already here because the developer and city staff didn't want to interact with them. I was the keeper of the keys, and I would tour the architects around to the building, because they had to measure everything, repetitively, because they

were splitting up these buildings into residences and offices. I got to know the residents pretty well, and one of the things they liked is that it was so affordable.

Will Macht explained to me the facts of life at the time, which were that this project was going to be really expensive. Initial estimates came in in the five-to-seven million-ish range, and then quickly went up to ten million and then even beyond when final bids came in. He said, "There's no way that affordable housing could support the rents that we need to get on Officers Row because this project will have a bond mortgage. You've got have money to pay the mortgage."

It was a really good crash course in economics and how historic buildings have to find their way in our modern world. Of course, I still held out the little hope in the back of my mind that somehow, someday, historic buildings could be affordable housing. You know, a hint toward the future. But at this point, Officers Row had to be a very specific thing.

There was a conference center discussed in the early plans, and retail and lodging, all kinds of things, but the constraints of the place really dictated what it needed to be. The site couldn't accommodate a ton of parking or extra add-ons, which you need for lodging and retail. The less risky option was apartments and office space.

MH: Did you feel that Vancouver or Clark County at large was in need of affordable housing at the time?

JG: In 20/20 hindsight, it wasn't anything like today but I felt strongly about it as a twenty-year-old, I think, because I couldn't afford housing. I had the internship, and the pay wasn't a lot. The City offered housing to me on the Row. Our development office was Building 18, and in the back of that building were the maid's quarters from days past. There was this little tiny stairwell with little pie-shaped stairs that you went up in the very back of the building. I had a little sitting room and a little bedroom and a little bathroom with a really big clawfoot tub. It was a fantastic place to live. I got really grounded in that experience.

One of the first pieces of furniture that the development team bought for the Marshall House was the very large table that sits in the conference room now. That was in the dining room of this home that I lived in. I shared the kitchen space, which was on the main floor. My boss said it was okay if I hosted Thanksgiving dinner for my family there one year. That was a great experience for my family. From my relationship with the tenants here before the project, I knew that affordability was important to them. Officers Row wasn't that type of place, because it needed to pay for some of its own rehab, right? But it definitely planted that seed in my mind.

MH: Take me through the rehabilitation process.

JG: As the concept changed from conference and retail and hospitality to apartments and offices, the architect's focus was on how to split up the homes. Most of them were originally duplexes but some of them were single homes. There's everything from two units, to eight units in some of the biggest buildings.

I can remember being in job meetings and the architects would talk through challenges that they were having on the plans because this property was on the National Register. Our attention was very much focused on meeting the National Park Service regulations.

The architects were struggling with things like, how do you add an extra set of stairs into this space? Add kitchens? Work the windows in? They decided that the stairs and the kitchens all had to be on the inboard side of the units as they were splitting them up. So, you have a staircase and it's on the inner wall. Most of the homes originally didn't have separate kitchens. The new units had the kitchen kind of tucked in the back and open to the living areas. It was a very elegant solution for a super challenging little game of Tetris. Of course, all the units were different, because all the houses were different. Even the few houses that had the same plan, had little differences. The differences create a lot of charm.

MH: What were some of the challenges in the actual construction process?

JG: There were a lot of challenges. You always have surprises in historic building projects. One of the early challenges was that we had to value engineer the budget, which means you've got to cut the budget so that you can afford the project. Most of the value engineering that we found were things that we had to sacrifice. Hard surface countertops were originally specified, and we valued engineered back to plastic laminate. We really wanted to restore the hardwood floors, like you have hardwood floors exposed here at the Marshall House in some places. We had to do carpeting throughout the project. That was a big sacrifice. Everybody was bemoaning carpeting but the hardwood floors are under there, if anybody ever wants to find them again.

We tried to select things that weren't forever choices, but choices that were practical and that could be changed later if somebody changed their minds. We blocked off the fireplaces because we didn't have money to restore the whole chimney. The chimneys are still there, of course. Somebody could open them up. I remember a big deal was made over finding how we were going to finish off the fireplaces. It was decided that they were going to have summer fronts, which were a panel, usually metal back in the day, that you put in front of the firebox so that you could close it off. Then the question was, how are you going to finish the summer fronts? We decided on black because we had some black hardware here and there, and that that would be most appropriate. All of those details that you see in the buildings now, were all the result of lengthy discussions to figure out what was going to be the best finish for the buildings on the budget that we had.

One of the other challenges that came up during construction was archaeology. The most recent history before the current buildings was that there were log cabins that were the original housing for people at Officers Row. There are these great spaces in between the houses now but there were buildings there. Between buildings seven and eight, which are the two little houses right on the traffic circle at Officers Row, we had planned a parking lot, because those were supposed to be the retail areas. I think it was like the first or second scoop of the backhoe, and they started to hit things like 1800s-era trash. I think we hit some old post or brick foundations there. The National Park Service said we must stop, and research the site.

Luckily we had Fort Vancouver archaeologists hanging out just waiting to come in. I think the whole process took maybe three months, maybe a little longer. Whenever anybody in construction hears "archaeology," everybody goes, "argh!" because it does cause a lot of delay. It really changed the path of Officers Row as well, because that space was the one last little retail holdout. It was decided that those would turn into office buildings that didn't need a ton of parking. We could just eliminate that parking lot and have the archaeological items remain underground.

There were some folks that were disappointed at the time that Officers Row wouldn't have that additional active element. We have Marshall House and Grant House but folks really lamented the loss of that retail. We have another opportunity for that sort of vitality and engagement at the West Barracks. Because where the Officers Row houses were the retreat for the officers after they got off of work, it was for their families and it was supposed to be an area that was quieter and more relaxing. That's what Officers Row has turned out to be now today. The West Barracks were full of activity and engagement and soldiers going to the PX and to the NCO Club, and going about their day-to-day lives. It was a buzzing place of activity, and it could be that way again.

MH: When you were originally planning, did you plan for Officers Row to be that kind of sleepy community? Or did you want it to have the vitality?

JG: One of the nice things about life with the City of Vancouver is that they did a lot of community engagement. I think that there was a sense of Officers Row wanting to be all things to all people. And it would have been great, right? It would have been great for hospitality to be here, for restaurants to be here. We do have a restaurant now, which is cool, and we do have a lot of public access at the Marshall House and the Grant House, which was a nice compromise, considering.

We wanted to impart that feeling of history, that feeling of welcoming, that feeling of respite. When you ask people why historic preservation is important, I mean, history geeks like us, we always love the buildings, right? The buildings, the buildings, the buildings. But it's not really about the buildings; it's about the people. Not only the people that lived here originally, maybe worrying about their skirts or their kids out here in the wild, wild west, and what it was going to be like. But the people now. The people in the community. The people who get to walk up the walks and hold onto the porcelain doorknobs, and see what things were like, and have that feeling of generational impact in the community. That's what preservation's all about to us. Ultimately through all of the budget challenges and debates about what this area wanted to be, we really had to go back to that. What was that original feeling and how can that shine through?

MH: You mentioned community outreach and community involvement. Can you talk about some of the public programming you were involved with?

JG: Lucky for me, the city hired me after that first internship on Officers Row. I really got a wonderful education from all of the people that I got to work with on Officers Row. Not only Steve Burdick and Will Macht, but the architects, George McMath and Bill Hawkins and Rob Dortignacq, and the contractors. There was a great superintendent on the job. His name was Frank Messenger. Their job trailer was right out here outside the Marshall House. I remember going to the trailer a lot and checking in with them on things that we said we were going to do in last month's job meeting and how those were wrapping up and what surprises did they find on the job that week. He really taught me a lot about perseverance. No matter what comes up in these old buildings, you've got to find a way to deal with them. It was really fun to get to know him.

Ironically, the superintendent on the Howard House job was also named Frank. His name was Frank Temple. I found him to be the same sort of character. A lot of knowledge and experience on the job and dealing with these old buildings. Yes, you have to meet code but you also have to make it work within the framework of the building that is here.

One of the things that I enjoyed after the city hired me to manage the Marshall House was figuring out how to get people involved with history and this place. We had things that were focused on fun, like wreath-making parties at the holidays. I had a friend, Don Blount, who had access to a lot of greenery, and he would bring the greenery to the Marshall House. We did the first one in the back room, and that turned out to be chaos. So, the next year, we rented a tent and had heaters and had the greens delivered. For a couple of seasons there, we made wreaths on Officers Row. We also had a Victorian Santa who would be right here in the parlor and read stories to kids. He had great velvet robes with white fur, a hat that went with it, and this deep, resonant voice and super nice beard. We had a lot of fun programs like that.

Then we had programs and exhibits that edged more on the educational. We had a great exhibit in the Marshall House about C.E.S. Wood and Chief Joseph that included borrowed Native American and military artifacts and a video.

Then we had some events that really kind of mixed up the two, which were probably my favorites. You have history but you inject a lot of fun into it. We had a program called "Ghost Stories on Officers Row." Some of them were actually ghost stories of people who had seen spirits in different buildings. Some of them were stories that we told about the history, like General Sully dying in the Grant House. We had some history that interpreted Amelia Earhart and her flight. We actually brought a plane up from Pearson Air Field, and parked it in the parking lot of the Marshall House. My mother played the part of Amelia Earhart in skits. It was a really fun way of getting people to know a little bit of the history, and getting them over to the Row.

MH: You mentioned surprises on a weekly basis. Are there any notable surprises that you remember?

JG: The archaeology was a big one. There was a hot and heavy debate about plaster. You really didn't know that people could talk as much about plaster as we did on Officers Row. There were some purists in the group that said, "We have to have plaster! It's going back in the Row."

Then there were those of us on the budget side who said, "We cannot afford plaster on Officers Row!" You can see here in the ceiling of the Marshall House, there was some pretty fantastic plaster. In the other Officers Row houses, it was a little more simple, but there were still some nice plaster details.

So, we kept as much of the plaster as we physically could. We had electricians who were opening little holes in the bottom and the top, trying to fish wire through the walls and the ceilings. They would come to us at job meetings and say, "We really can't do that." And we said, "You have to do that." So they went ahead and did it. Most of the time, we were able to save the plaster. But there was one day I can remember there was a big crisis at the job meeting. The contractors came in all dejected. They sat down and they said, "Well, we have bad news for you. The keys broke in house number 17."

And we're like, "Keys? What keys?"

The keys in plaster. You have lathe and plaster. When you squish the plaster through the keys, it squishes through and holds through the lathe. Those pieces on the back, they're called keys. So, through vibration or whatever happened with house 17, a whole big wall of plaster crashed down on

top of the stairwell one day. Everybody was just like, oh my God, I can't believe it! So, then there was the discussion, do we go back with plaster? Do we go back with drywall?

It finally was decided that we would put drywall on in the same thickness as the old plaster because it was a big wall and it didn't have any super big details on it. That was one for the creativity of the project team to figure out when is it important to use the especially expensive treatment, and when is it appropriate to use the more regular treatments. When you have the plaster details, you brought the plaster guy in. But if you have a big wall where your keys break off, then you use your drywall.

MH: Can you tell me more about how your career developed after you left Officers Row?

JG: A big part of my career not only got prepped by all the great mentors I had during the Officers Row project when I was an intern, but also by the Howard House project. I'd been with the city for about a decade and they were looking for a project manager for the Howard House rehabilitation. I'd had a little taste of project management in the mid to early '90s when we restored the porch on the Marshall House. When we did the Officers Row project, as I mentioned, we were looking for ways to save money. Somebody in the past had remodeled the porch on the Marshall House to have simpler elements. A lot less gingerbread. It was in pretty good shape. So, we decided as a cost-saving measure to save it during the Officers Row project. The house also had a fairly decent roof. It was red, but it was decent and we kept it. Everybody was like, "Oh, I can't believe we're keeping that red roof!" But we needed to shave some dollars, and we did.

A fantastic finance guy at the City of Vancouver named Kent Shorthill, a few years later, figured out a way to refinance the Officers Row bonds. That gave us some extra money to play with during a time in the project when you usually don't have a lot of money and gave us the chance to restore the exterior of the Marshall House. I worked with an architect named Dan Edwards. He had worked with McMath Hawkins Dortignacq during the original project and I'd gotten to know him. He meticulously drew plans from the historic photographs because we didn't have any plans for the Marshall House. We had a couple of really good views.

I got to manage that project. PNC did it for us again. And that was great. But it was a little job. You know, it was a couple hundred thousand dollars at that time. So, I didn't really have a lot of experience to be the project manager at the Howard House. But the city manager at the time, John Fishbach, was a great believer in community interaction, and interaction of neighborhoods, and people.

I happened to live in Hough neighborhood at the time, which is a neighborhood in downtown Vancouver. I was the chair of the neighborhood association. We were going through a little controversy at the time. Some development was happening. So, the neighborhood association had to work with the developer to get some live/work units in where they just kind of wanted to have work/work units, and get a park in. We were negotiating.

The city manager called me into the office one day and he said, "So, you're having challenges there with the neighborhood association." I said, "Well, it's just part of the process. You just have to work through it until you can (sighs) meet the spirit of what the neighborhood wants." We were able to work through it with the Vancouver Housing Authority, and got a park and got some live/work units, and really got some great things for the neighborhood. I said to the city manager, "And can you let me do the Howard House project?"

And he said, “Yes.” (laughs) So that was a great success for me. I had great folks to work with. David DiCesare was my boss at the City of Vancouver at that time. He was a great boss and I could always go into his office and bend his ears on stuff.

And the parks department was there. I remember going to the parks department saying, “Hey, we need to figure out what’s going to happen around the Howard House. This is a great big piece of property. The landscape architect would really like it to be meandering, natural, Japanese, style. Which sounds really fun. However, I really think we need a plaza, because people will want to gather.”

The parks department said, “Yes, do a plaza. Yes, have people gather. And, oh, by the way, here’s the Fort Vancouver Rose Society. They want to do some historic big garden roses out in the yard. They have a really nice rose garden in Esther Short Park, but it’s tea roses. They’re little.” With the Howard House, we had the chance to do these big gardens’ worth of roses. They’re still there, which is exciting.

We asked for public input on other things. We had a group of caterers that worked here at the Marshall House for event rentals when we were doing event rentals here. I asked one of them who was interested, Susan Courtney, to say, “Okay, well, for a catering kitchen at the Howard House, what would you like to be different about it at the Marshall House?” So, she came in and she helped us design the catering kitchen.

Then we asked the people doing events, and the folks that had offices here, “Well, what do you wish you had more of?” The answer was, “We wish we had more outlets and network so we could plug our computers in.” The Howard House was planned to be a welcome center. There were going to be professional exhibits there. That’s why the colors on the inside of the house are more muted because it was designed for more traditional exhibits.

It ended up being more financially feasible to do offices at the Howard House and that kind of thing. Those extra outlets and the data jacks came in really handy.

Another lesson learned from Officers Row is that it really is nice if you have more things that were accessible, and more ways of them being accessible. With the Howard House, we worked the grades so that the back part of the house had some really nice entryways and access to parking and ADA grades. We added an elevator at the Howard House and that worked out great for accessibility.

One lesson learned that we could not employ at the Howard House was the plaster thing again. Oh my gosh. So tired of talking about plaster. (laughs) But the Howard House had a fire and it had a lot of water damage. It was rough. There was a point where we tore those flat-roofed NCO wings off the Howard House that you could see clear through the building. The contractor said, “You know, we need to get some shoring up right away because it’s starting to go like this in the wind.” (laughs) They came in and they shored it but we had to take the lathe and plaster off just because it was falling off. There were no keys. You know, it was done and done.

But the problem is that when you take all that stuff off, you see how it was framed in 1879, which is not code today. So, the structural engineer really struggled with that house. And we struggled with

budget, because of course you don't know any of that until you get in there and you have to take the plaster off.

MH: Are there any questions that you wish that I had asked you during our interview?

JG: I think the one thing that I would like to go back to is the people. The Royce Pollards, the Bruce Hagensens, the Pat Jollotas. The folks that really made Officers Row happen. You know, I was a very small cog in the wheel when I was here, and it took a lot of political will to do this. It took a lot of people bringing their expertise on so many different fronts. Paul Nelson and Key Property Services were our property managers. When I was an intern, my office was right next to his. I got to listen to his property management side of the equation, which is a lot different than construction. So, you bring these interdisciplinary efforts into making this place, which was so important. Because you're able to not only support the property financially, but you're able to make it great for the people and the community. That's what really made Officers Row happen is all of the amazing people that were willing to stand up and say, this place matters, and it's all of our responsibility to bring it to completion and make it shine.

MH: Julie, thank you so much.

JG: Thank you.

[End Interview.]