

Officers Row Memories Oral History Project

Mike Greenslade

Project Role: Field Superintendent



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: Mike, would you please introduce yourself?

Mike Greenslade: My name is Mike Greenslade. I'm from Troutdale, Oregon. I had the opportunity back in the late '80s to renovate the Officers Row homes working for P and C Construction, a general contractor. I'm a founder of Bremik Construction. We do a lot of historic renovations. Just recently got selected to do a historic renovation down at the University of Oregon. We're really excited about it.

MH: What was your role with the Officers Row project?

MG: I was the field superintendent. I managed the subcontractors. We self-performed the foundation upgrades and site concrete. All the carpentry work including framing and finish carpentry on the buildings. We renovated every one of the homes on the Row. Each one had their individual challenges.

MH: Prior to your work at Officers Row, had you worked on historic structures in the same way?

MG: Yes. I cut my teeth on a lot of them. We did a lot of work for Bill Naito back in the day. Albers Mill. Several of the historic buildings in downtown Portland.

MH: What was Vancouver or Officers Row more specifically like during the time that you were working here?

MG: When we started, they were pretty much abandoned homes. All the roofs got replaced. A lot of the buildings had major leaks. There were a couple of buildings that had fires and there was a lot of rebuilding of trusses and structure. It was dilapidated when it started. It was great to see a group of people that cared about this treasure and spent the money. The City of Vancouver raised the money and did it at the right time. I was looking at what this cost back in those days and what it would cost today. It would be hard to do today.

MH: What are your memories of how work began here? Was there an effort from the city to rehabilitate?

MG: I don't know the specific funding package for the project, but I know the city was very involved. There were a lot of different agencies involved. Worked with a fabulous couple of architects that were passionate, Bill Hawkins and George McMath. They were fantastic. The team that ended up being assembled from the carpenters and laborers on the ground all the way to the

top, were a pleasure to work with. Everybody was passionate about the project and doing it right. They really cared about saving the jewel of Officers Row. We came in early on and did an assessment of every building and worked through budgets and got to the point where we started the work. The result to this day is they still look fantastic.

MH: Can you give some more details of condition specifics?

MG: There were an array of structural issues. We had to upgrade where walls and foundations were failing. We had to rebuild a lot of brick foundations. We did a lot of temporary shoring. The Grant House was unique. A couple of its footing piers were stumps. We ended up finding some real structural issues with the Grant House. On the northeast side, we ended up having to excavate down to rebuild some structural elements. We uncovered a small dump area and discovered things like dishes and China. Work was stopped and the archaeologists and historical folks spent a few weeks there, sifting through it and collecting a lot of historic artifacts.

A unique thing about Officers Row that I found, and I'd never seen prior to or since, was that all the wood trim is cedar. I guess there was a cedar mill either onsite or just offsite that they milled all the wood. There were a lot of unique features of molding. We rebuilt all the decks which were rotten. Did new structure. Reinforced all the foundations. Spun all the new balusters. We had a lot of custom-made knifes to do this project, from the moldings to the balusters to the handrails in the Marshall House, etcetera.

MH: Did you use cedar? Did you replace in kind?

MG: We didn't use cedar in a lot of cases. We used clear vertical grain fir. On the decks and things like that, yes, that was cedar. But not in the interior. We renovated and restored as much of the existing material as we could.

MH: Were there plaster moldings still intact?

MG: There was a lot of effort that went into restoring the plaster from water damage and just age. This house, for example, we did a lot of work restoring the plaster that was damaged. All the walls are lath and plaster. Everything was a balloon frame, which you really don't see today. They had the length in the lumber locally and it was common construction back then.

MH: What were some challenges associated with working with balloon frame buildings that you don't typically work with?

MG: When it's balloon frame, from the foundation all the way to the roof structure is the same wall. It requires a lot more temporary shoring. If you have a second floor where you've got to do structure work, you've got to shore it from the first floor. Sometimes we'd have to shore all the way to the ground. It required a lot more shoring and methodical practice to figure it out and working with the structural engineer on solutions.

MH: Tell me more about the actual process, day to day, of what you were working on.

MG: Well, you do an inventory and see what needed to be replaced or what kind of knife for plaster you had to have made. We had to get ahead of all of it. A lot of it was the same type of molding

within the homes, but some of it certainly was different. Then a new knife was made to match the profile. Pre-planning is really important for a project like Officers Row. It's figuring out the mousetrap and then getting things ordered. So, when the craftsman were here to install the work, materials were available for the task.

MH: Were most of the people who were working on the physical work trained in historic structures and preservation, conservation?

MG: No specific training for the most part. They were talented carpenters with a keen eye for quality. I've just got a lot of experience doing historic projects over the years and you learn what to look for and what's important. When working on historic renovations, you're building a new mousetrap everyday. You've got to think outside the box, and you really get to use your craftsmanship when you're doing these historic renovations.

MH: In terms of the kind of top-down relationships on the work site, were there people who were trained in preservation, in conservation or historic architects that had a vision of how they wanted the restoration to go?

MG: Yes, it was important for the leadership to understand the programming and critical elements to hit the historic goals set for the project. We worked with the city, the historic folks, and architectural team who were well versed in this type of project. We all had a goal to hit the mark and provide a high-quality, historic project, that would last for many years to come.

The team was passionate and had a lot of experience doing historic preservation projects. Bill Hawkins and George McMath were just fantastic to work with. We would put our heads together, and come up with a good solution and move forward. We all wanted to do it right. That was the attitude. Everybody had good ideas, were reasonable, and it was a team effort throughout the process. That's the recipe for a successful project.

MH: What did you like to work on most?

MG: I liked it all. It was unique. I came back after the main phase was finished and open to the public and rebuilt the front porch, stairs and the railing on the second level of the front porch at the Marshall House, along with the widow's watch and the cupola/turret. This project was done on a second phase once funding was in place. It was really cool to get to come back and finish what we couldn't afford in phase one.

MH: What do you think Fort Vancouver and Officers Row symbolize either for Vancouver or national history? What's its importance?

MG: I think it's fantastic, and it's amazing how many people still don't know the history that exists here locally. It played a big role in opening the west on a national level. I mean, we had a president who visited here, and has a house named after him, President Ulysses Grant. That's cool. I think the neatest thing I discovered was when I was working on the Grant House. I went up to the attic to start assessing things, and I found a map behind a wall. It was a map created by a guy stationed here surveying the Oregon Territory. It was a hand-drawn map. I gave it to the city of Vancouver and I believe it's in the historical museum in town. But just to see that, and then some carvings on the

walls up there about the guys that were out here surveying Oregon Territory and missing their families, lonely but excited. It was fascinating to me.

MH: Give me more about what you found.

MG: One of the things we found on the Grant House interior walls were several layers of wallpaper the owner decided they wanted removed. We discovered the wallpaper was not glued to the surface, which is normal. It was nailed and stapled to the wall. It was tedious work pulling the nails and not damaging the wood siding that would end up as the finished product. After two or three weeks of work we finished the job and to this day the original wall boards are there to enjoy.

MH: Were there any other kind of instances where there were discoveries made?

MG: There were a several. For example, if you look at the sidewalks out here, we were not allowed to dig down into the ground because the historical treasures that existed. We would only remove the grass so as to not disturb the soil and any artifacts. The sidewalks actually extend above the grass and then we brought in topsoil to blend it. The gas company was running a gas line down the back alleyway road. In that process, they found a pine box, it was left in place, recorded and the gas line was relocated around it.

The Marshall House had some pretty cool stuff that we ended up giving to the historical society. I think there were some old maps, some stained glass and some different things we found in here.

MH: Is the stained glass in any of the houses original?

MG: I think it was here in the Marshall House. I think we did have some we had to repair, and had stained glass people match it. It's all leaded glass. It's the original way they made stained glass.

MH: How did that work with certain things that were more specialized?

MG: With the door hardware -- the porcelain knobs and the mortise sets -- we were kind of trading back and forth with Hippo Hardware to make everything work. We ended up giving them in return some of the door hardware that we didn't need. You're always turning over the rocks and seeking out the people that can fill the need on these older buildings.

MH: Tell me about Hippo Hardware.

MG: They have a lot of old door hardware and different relics from old buildings. They have been in Portland for several years. For a project like this, we had to rebuild and get the pocket doors operating right. They don't make mortise sets now like they did back then. So, you'd have to source them, or find parts and rebuild them and put them back in. Hippo Hardware was a good partner regarding matching hardware.

MH: Did you work on every house on the Row?

MG: I think I touched every one.

MH: What was your favorite house to work on?

MG: The Grant House. The history, and it was the first house built of those that are currently here. And if the walls could talk, I can imagine that would be an amazing story. It required a lot of work on every phase due to its age. The Marshall House was another one I did a lot of work on. It was unique compared to the rest of them. It's a beautiful place.

MH: Did you work in stages? Did you start on one house and then move to the next? Or were there concurrent projects on all the houses?

MG: It was phased a bit in the beginning to get the design finished and our hands wrapped around the needs of each place. But for the most part, it ended up concurrent. We had a lot going on.

MH: How many people were working at one time?

MG: I don't know. There were probably days when we had 175 people here. We did new mechanical, plumbing and electrical systems in all of the buildings.

MH: What was it like to work on a project like that where there's so many people?

MG: It comes down to great pre-planning, communication, and working as a team. Sitting down a couple of times a week with the leaders of every subcontractor and discussing the plans and where we were on schedule and what was coming up the next few weeks. It's like any big project. It's great communication with a great plan for executing the work.

MH: Do you remember any of the other subcontractors?

MG: Jacob's Heating was here. I don't remember a lot of them. I think Fred Shearer & Sons was here doing the plaster work. P&C was the general contractor and then all the subcontractors were hired by them.

MH: Tell me about how the experience here at Fort Vancouver impacted you as a contractor, as a worker.

MG: Well, I'm really proud of it. It excited me the day I showed up and it still does today. It's something you can relate back to when you're interviewing for a historic renovation job. We've worked with the city and looked at some of the barracks and some of the other projects around here. I'm sure someday we'll end up back here doing another project.

MH: How do you see the future of the work that you did here? In terms of its lasting power.

MG: The bones are good here and it's more of a maintenance program from this point forward. The buildings can last another 50, 100 years. Keep them painted. Keep the caulking maintained and things will do well.

MH: In terms of you starting your own contracting company, did your experience at Officers Row have anything to do with that?

MG: Well, you know, everything had something to do with it. My partner and I worked together at P&C, and we both wanted to go have our own company. Bremik Construction was formed on June 1st of 2004. In 2006, as a very young company, because of our relationships and our experience, it opened the door for us to work with Art DeMuro. Coming out of the gate in 2006, we ended up doing the White Stag Block, which was a huge opportunity, huge risk, but another significant historic renovation. It's places like Officers Row that we cut our teeth on in the historic renovation arena. Art knew that. We ended up pulling that off. And it's a great building.

MH: When you get these projects, what's the kind of source material? Do you get to look at original plans? And does it just kind of depend on what's available?

MG: It really depends on what's available. We've done a lot of work up at Timberline Lodge and I've got to see and use the original hand-drawn plans for Timberline Lodge which they used to construct the lodge. You could build to this day off this set of plans. It was really done well. In most cases, you don't have that documentation. You start with a clean canvas and figure things out.

MH: For Officers Row, did you have plans? Did you have drawings?

MG: I don't recall using original plans, the architects may have had something.

MH: It was kind of a forensic process of restoration.

MG: Yes.

MH: Is that challenging?

MG: I find it interesting. Again, you've got to think outside the box a little bit and figure things out, solve problems. Typically, the buildings here had a lot of similarities. The siding, for example. Most of them are the same siding profile and species, and same with the porches and the balusters and rails and trim. The structural elements were usually similar.

MH: We mentioned cedar before. Was the siding cedar?

MG: Yes.

MH: Was the lath cedar?

MG: I don't think that probably was. That was probably fir.

MH: Yeah. How about the support beams? Or I guess the balloon.

MG: No, that was Doug fir. Old growth.

MH: How did you source the lumber for the frames?

MG: Some of it was new lumber. Some of it was reused from other buildings here. Two by four today is an inch and a half by three and a half. Back in those days, it was full two by four, rough sawn. We were taking walls out. If it was good material, we'd pull the nails and they'd get reused.

MH: How do you see Officers Row, fitting into the community?

MG: I believe it's a huge benefit for the community. It's never felt like the word's out regarding what's really here and how neat it is. Across the river, there's probably a lot of people in Portland that have never heard of Officers Row. Maybe they've heard of Fort Vancouver, but they probably really don't know what it is. I assume the City and Trust would like a bigger group of people to know and enjoy Officers Row. I hope it is promoted and the word is spread about this piece of history. It deserves it.

MH: What was your favorite memory working on Officers Row?

MG: My favorite thing, hands down was finding that Oregon Territory map. That was awesome. It was hand drawn. The guys were out here in the wild untamed country . They were literally surveying for the Oregon Territory. Then it's the whole relationship with Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce and Officers Row and Howard and Grant and the whole group. If you understand that, it's pretty touching and it's pretty amazing what took place in Vancouver, Washington, way back in that day. Vancouver and Portland have an amazing history.