

ABSTRACT: Mayor Adam Ortiz has a devoted interest in the history of Edmonston. He feels that Edmonston has historically been a community where people make their start. Adam Francis Plummer, a freed slave, started Mt. Rose, a settlement in what is today Edmonston. This was the first recorded development. After WWII, individuals coming back from the war moved to Edmonston, because the housing was inexpensive and it was in close proximity to Washington D.C. Today, there are a large proportion of Hispanic immigrants who call Edmonston home. Mayor Ortiz has only positive things to say about the community, which he has lived in since he graduated college. He conveys his views and ideas about Edmonston, history, and community dynamics.

Mayor Ortiz on Edmonston: In the most common terms, it's a working class neighborhood. In more flowery terms, it's a bridging community. It's where people tend to get their start in the United States. It tends to be the place from which they pursue the American dream.

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La Fondita – Edmonston



Post-WWII Housing – 49th St. Edmonston



Edmonston Town Hall



Second Phase Housing - Edmonston

Port Towns Interview Project
Suzanne Stasiulatis interviewing Mayor Adam Ortiz
Interview at Franklin's Restaurant: 5123 Baltimore Ave., Hyattsville, MD 20781
October 17, 2007

Suzanne: Can you state your name, age, where you are from, and your organization?

Adam Ortiz: I am Adam Ortiz, Mayor of the town of Edmonston, in gorgeous Prince George's County. I was born in New York. I went to college in Baltimore, and have pretty much been down here ever since.

Suzanne: What do you feel is the character of the community? How is Edmonston different from other communities?

Adam Ortiz: In the most common terms, it's a working class neighborhood. In more flowery terms, it's a bridging community. It's where people tend to get their start in the United States. It tends to be the place from which they pursue the American dream. We'll talk about this more I'm sure, but historically that's been what the town has been about. We see immigration, and young families coming out the district to try to make their way. It's the same sort of thing. It's a place where people first set their feet down in America.

Suzanne: We are doing research on history and development in the Port Towns. Tell me about how history is a part of every day activities in Edmonston.

Adam Ortiz: There are so many different strands. I mean there's sociopolitical history that we live out every day. There's geographic history that we live out every day. I can bore you with a thousand different strands. The starting point for Edmonston began with a relocated slave family from the Calvert plantation at Riversdale. At the time of the emancipation proclamation, Adam Francis Plummer was an educated slave who founded his own settlement outside of the Riversdale plantation, which is now present day Edmonston. He is the first settler that we are aware of. I'm sure there were Native Americans and others over time, but this is the first recorded one. He took his family and moved to a little area, which was on the west side of the Anacostia in Edmonston, not far from where I live today. He continued to work at the Riversdale plantation, but he did it for a salary. He saved his money, built up the settlement, and traveled around the United States to try to find other family members that had been sold off into slavery throughout the eastern seaboard. He was successful in some ways and very unsuccessful in others. Over time, the family spread out and the settlement disappeared. The settlement was called Mt. Rose settlement. That, I think, is a really good place to kind of start thinking of what Edmonston is today. I mean, this is a person who was disenfranchised for a variety of reasons clearly, but he had incredible vision and potential. He was an educated slave at a time when slaves were hardly ever educated. Maryland was one of the few slave holding states that allowed slaves to learn how to read and write. He kept a diary throughout his life. That diary is now at the Smithsonian and it's the only living diary to have been written by a slave. Other slaves had written diaries, but they got their education afterward, like Frederick Douglas. His diary is kind of a symbol to us for

having incredible potential, having that spark of passion, light, vision, and going well beyond, lifting up and rising above circumstances. He lived in what is today a FEMA floodplain. I'm sure it was a cheaper area to buy even back then, when he purchased it. He still was a working person. He was a tradesman. As far as I know, he never got any higher education. Of course over generations, the Plummer family did become educated. Now, they are a pretty established family in the United States. But that's kind of the way that I look at it. Since the 1860s, 70s and 80s, the settlement has taken off. Since then, there have been waves of working people coming to the area, coming to this little nook, to try to get their feet on the ground. Around the turn of the century, Hyattsville was a wealthy suburb of Washington D.C. The summers in Washington, of course, were super hot, mosquito infested, and unpleasant. A lot of the rich folks, during the summer time when Congress was out and government wasn't meeting, would come out to the suburbs and live in Takoma Park, Hyattsville, and other places. That's why there are so many big, Victorian houses from about that period. A trolley line was built on Rt. 1, Rhode Island Avenue, as you probably know. There was a fair amount of transport and commerce in the area. For all the folks who lived out here and spent money and had these beautiful houses and shopped in downtown Hyattsville, somebody had to build the houses, clean the houses, sweep the streets, and do all that sort of stuff. That was about the time Edmonston became a small subdivision. If you look at the houses, there are three major building periods in Edmonston. One is right around the turn of the century. The other is from about 1910 to about 1925. And then there's another one after World War II, which I'll get to in a minute. From the turn of the century, there's maybe four or five houses still around, and they're big farmhouses, Hyattsville style. They were on big pieces of land. The houses that came between 1910 and 1925 were basically miniature versions of Hyattsville houses. They were cute Arts and Crafts, bungalow style homes, but they were very small, very tiny. You can see that if you go down Decatur Street. This was the working version of the people across the tracks. Literally, they were on the other side of the tracks from those of greater means. But, it blossomed. Enough people came and populated it. They felt, for the first time, a community was established. At the time, Decatur Street was a dirt road across a rickety wooden bridge over the Anacostia River. They had a lousy bridge. They could not have street lighting and did not have paved roads, while other areas did. In 1924, they decided to incorporate. They decided to upgrade their quality of life and to build a new bridge. That's why we like the imagery of the bridge in the town. That was kind of the first wave. In my mind, in the mind of a lot of us as we talk, this is the same sort of thing: humble circumstances, but doing your best to make your way with your God-given potential. That's what we saw at that time, when we became incorporated. One of the first mayors, Kinjori Matsudairi, was Japanese American. He was the first Japanese American mayor in American history. I don't know if that's true or not, but it really fits with this thread. He was reelected in, I believe 1943, which was during World War II, during the Japanese interment. The people of Edmonston opened a door and let this man walk through it. After World War II ends, the last and most recent phase of housing development emerged in the area, and it's one of the houses that I live in. It's the same sort of thing, small houses built like a rock, brick and plaster houses that will survive the apocalypse for sure. It was GI housing, for working people coming back from the war. Some of them still live in town. They were also pioneers. Some of the first Mexican immigrants, one of them across the street from

me, fought in the war and settled here, because the housing was affordable and they could work. To this day, there's a lot of immigration and there are a lot of new Americans who are living in town. My estimate, more than a third, 40% to 50% are immigrant families, first generation and newly immigrant families. This is the place where they're choosing to get their start. There are a lot of other immigrant communities in the area: different parts of Hyattsville and Langley Park. I believe that very few have the concentration of home ownership that ours is. That's what we are today. I'll say to conclude at least this little part by saying it's still a very diverse area. There are some of the Black families from turn of the century who lived in the segregated section of town who still live in town. There are some of the White families who settled after World War II. There are these immigrant families. We all get a long pretty well. There's very little discrimination, very little outward racism. The town treats all of us as equals. People work together and get along. It's not a perfect place, but it's a pretty good place.

Suzanne: You have such an interest in history. Are there any programs on tap for Edmonston?

Adam Ortiz: No, there's no formal historical society. There are lots of community events. We have our own Edmonston Day, and we have a moon bounce and clowns. The kids come out and have a good time. Next week for Halloween, all the police come out and we escort the kids throughout the town during trick or treat. That's always fun and you're welcome to join us. At holiday time, Santa Claus jumps on a fire truck and drives through town. I guess that's pretty standard, good old small town American activities for people to come together. We are so small we don't necessarily have a historical society. This is the historical society here at Franklin's in this booth.

Suzanne: What is your favorite thing about Edmonston, conceptual or concrete?

Adam Ortiz: It's just a very comfortable, diverse place. There are very few pretensions. People are very down to earth. People talk and wave to their neighbors every morning when I'm driving. They mow each others lawns. They look out for each other. It's a genuine community. It's faced a good bit of adversity. It's not the richest place or the fanciest place, but it's a pretty damn good place.

Suzanne: What is the Port Towns? What does it mean?

Adam Ortiz: It means a few different things. Functionally, it's a way for the Port Towns to work together on economic development projects, because by ourselves we're very small and it's difficult to pool the resources to leverage what influence we have to get things like that done. In the broader sense, in the conceptual sense, it's a middle-class area along the Anacostia River, right outside of Washington D.C. It has had its own identity over time, it's own uniqueness really. This is a way to tie us together through our common water way.

Suzanne: What started the idea? Economics?

Adam Ortiz: I think it's a combination of things. It's founding predates me, but my sense is that it was just necessity.

Suzanne: Can you speak to what area history was like before the idea of the Port Towns?

Adam Ortiz: Traditionally, our area has been an underserved area. That even goes to the building of the bridge across Decatur Street. There is a rickety wooden bridge that county and state folks did not want to help out with. It is an underserved area. It has been an underserved area. There is really poor infrastructure, very little economic development, and many blighted properties. The best symbol, the best thing to point to is the train. Every day, eight plus times a day, people are stuck behind traffic, because this CSX freighter is holding up everything. How can you have a community that is being sliced in two throughout the day? The communities came together and were able to pool their resources to build a bridge and help things flow.

Suzanne: Do you feel people are attracted to the community because of history?

Adam Ortiz: I think it is part of it. I think people long for a sense of place. They long for that sense of community, that strand that connects them to generations before and generations to come. History is just telling that story. Who are the people who walked down the street? Who are the people who looked at this land? Who are the people who got stuck behind the train, when it's crossing the street? Who are the people who were flooded, who had suffered flooding in the past? Those kinds of things, I think are a part of the equation.

Suzanne: In what ways is the community receptive to history or to the idea of the Port Towns? And how do they respond?

Adam Ortiz: Generally, I would say that the response is very favorable. It's a unifying idea, just as good stories in history are. You hang on to stories and tell them over and over again. You know it's a unifying idea. What connects us to this person down the street? What is it that makes us special in our own way? Not necessarily better, but what makes us special? What makes us, us? And it's that unifying idea that it provides us.

Suzanne: Tell me about revitalization in the community. Has there recently been more headway? Or is it something that's going to happen?

Adam Ortiz: I would say that's our number one struggle. There has been more progress in the last 5 years, than in the previous 25 years. I think that the next 10 years are going to be very good. Again, it's the urban, underserved blues. We're living in an area that has suffered from the White Flight, suburban sprawl, and resources being drawn out of concentrated, dense areas. It's a tough battle to fight. At the same time, there are enough people with similar vision and similar good will who are working to correct it. In concrete terms, we are changing the zoning throughout much of the Port Towns, which would keep bad development and uses that aren't "community friendly," out. It would help facilitate the ability for some businesses to come in. Some of us are also working to

attract businesses. I, for one, have offered major tax breaks to different retailers that would come into the area to just make this an easy fit for them. We're stuck in some ways, but there are ways out. The big problem is that we're so close to Washington, property values are high. If somebody wants to try to get a restaurant off the ground, they usually find it's too big of a risk. So, they don't. It hits entrepreneurship.

Suzanne: Can you tell me anything else about race relationships in the community, historically or today?

Adam Ortiz: Historically, we're in some way the child of slavery. The town was founded by freed slaves. It was a segregated area. Maryland was a segregated state, of course. We had segregated streets up until the 1950s. To pretend that didn't exist is, in one way or another, not true. For example, we have this one street, 46th Avenue, which was the segregated street in Jim Crow times. It had a lot of small houses. A developer came and bought about 85% to 90% of them out and put in industrial properties, industrial, manufacturing, auto related uses were put in along the street. Three of the families held out and two of those families still live in their homes. This is the historically segregated street, which to this day is 100% African American. It's only one block that these folks lived on. They are right across the street from industrial uses. The service they have received has been very poor. The street had never been graded properly. When it rains, it washes a lot of the industrial pollution onto the street and into their yards. From the day I came into office, I have been trying to work with the county, which is in charge of land use and grading, and some of these bigger things to get them to enforce land use and related laws. They haven't done it. These families continue to suffer in an underserved area, and they are direct descendents from the segregation. Does it exist in some ways? Yes, it does. Is it dominant? In some ways maybe. Have we overcome it in some ways? Yes, absolutely.

Suzanne: What economic changes have been made in the past 10 to 20 years?

Adam Ortiz: I would say, overall, the economic vitality is certainly increasing. The wave of immigration has been clearly been really positive for us. We have people who have worked very hard, who move in with young families and are investing a lot in their homes. I have seen 7 homes I can think of, off the top of my head, in the last 2 years that have gone from a C or a C- to a B+ or an A, because people have just put so much time into renovating them. We are giving out building permits all the time for people to build additions and improve their property. It's certainly a working class area, that's obvious, but people are caring for it and clearly have some resources to be able to do that better than before. We also have a general store/grocery store that had been here for more than a decade. Now, it's a bustling restaurant with people hanging out all the time. It's a Mexican restaurant. Things are looking up.

Suzanne: How do children fit into the story of the town? Do children who grew up here stay in the community?

Adam Ortiz: Some do. Some don't. I mean it's a bridge. I was just talking to somebody today, who came back from the war. The daughter went to law school and is now is a lobbyist. She visits, but she doesn't live in Edmonston, probably because the houses are too small and she can afford something much bigger someplace else. There are some folks who stick around. I would say that, many of the families expect their kids to move up and out. And that's OK.

Suzanne: What are your satisfactions or dissatisfactions with the community?

Adam Ortiz: Satisfactions. It is a place where people can truly work together and get things done. We've done that. We have historically suffered from a lot of flooding, as you know. We're just a few months from solving that problem, because people came together and fought for the services we deserve. I mentioned that we've been underserved for decades. There's an incredible capacity to work together to improve the quality of life for us and the generations to come.

Dissatisfactions. That I have find it such a struggle to work with other levels of government, county, state, federal to help the little guys out. We pay a lot of taxes. Our property values are very high. We work very hard. I don't think we get that investment back. We have to fight for everything that we have, basic services at all levels. From storm water not running into somebody's yard, to the burdens of immigration, it is not being addressed on a federal level. We just wish everybody else would do their job.

Suzanne: In what respects is Edmonston unique and how is it unique among the Port Towns?

Adam Ortiz: I guess it depends on your context. We're unique, because we are extraordinarily diverse. The census hasn't been updated to keep up with what has been happening, but I would say we are just about equal parts Black, White, and Hispanic. We get along just fine. We are a vibrant place, but a very modest place. That's hard to say. When you think of vibrant you tend to think of Bethesda, you tend to think of Georgetown. We aren't vibrant in that way. People live here and tend to really like it here. I think that is unique.

Suzanne: And among the Port Towns?

Adam Ortiz: Among the Port Towns, I would say that is true in all the Port Towns to different degrees. I would say we are a little different, because our history is more linked to the Riversdale Plantation. And we were founded basically by a freed slave family. In the other Port Towns, their history is more tied in with the history of Bladensburg as a port and the site of the war and being a major artery outside of Washington D.C. It's just a different strand, but we all weave together pretty well.

