

ABSTRACT: John Giannetti is a long-term resident of the area and is particularly interested in Bladensburg. He worked on the Indian Queen Tavern Restoration and is an authority on the property and its surroundings. The project included saving the Indian Queen Tavern and creating a museum. Unfortunately, the museum is no longer there. John feels strongly about how much history is within the Port Towns. He works with the Aman Memorial Trust and several other historic organizations. He hopes that one day there will be a County Historical Museum in the area.

John Giannetti on the Port Towns History: “You’ve got to save your historic landmarks. It’s absolutely essential in the development of the community. I think people like to see the old tavern. I’ve been looking at it for more than 65 years. If I went by there and it wasn’t there, what a shock it would be. It is reassuring when you save these old buildings. It makes you think about history and that’s what you’ve got to do. You don’t want to forget about it. You can learn from history is basically what I’m saying. It can be very educational and you can learn a lot of lessons.”



George Washington House - Bladensburg, MD



Peace Cross – Bladensburg, MD

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Location: Maryland Historical Trust; Call Number: PR15

Port Towns Interview Project

Suzanne Stasiulatis interviewing John Giannetti Sr.

Interview at Giannetti's Studio: 3806 38th St. Brentwood, MD 20722

November 14, 2007

Suzanne: OK. I need you to state your name, age, and where you're from?

John Giannetti: My name is John A. Giannetti Sr. I am 67 years old. I was born in Mt. Rainer, Maryland. I have lived in the Hyattsville/Mt. Rainer area, College Park, all my life, except for a short time while I was in the service.

Suzanne: What is your occupation?

John Giannetti: I am an Architectural Sculptor. We work on the restoration of buildings and do ornamental plaster in new homes and governmental buildings. We design, sculpt, or model various ornaments and then manufacture them and install them. We do the whole thing from beginning to end.

Suzanne: What do you do for the Aman Memorial Trust?

John Giannetti: The Aman Memorial Trust was a trust that was set up as a result of a gift by the Amans. They owned a little newspaper in the Hyattsville area. They supported a project that I was involved in called the Indian Queen Tavern Restoration Project, also known as the George Washington House Restoration. This was a project about a historic building that was going to be torn down about 1971 or 1972. The Prince George's Jaycees, which I was a member at that time, got behind an effort to save the building and then restore it. Since the bicentennial was coming up, we wanted to create a museum for the bicentennial. We were working toward that goal when Mr. Aman passed away. Then, a little later along when Mrs. Aman passed away, she left a portion of her estate to the upkeep and maintenance of the George Washington House to try to encourage people in historic preservation in and about Bladensburg. Later, we formed the Aman Memorial Trust. I was elected by the trustees to be the chairman. I have been the chairman ever since its inception, which now is probably going on 30 years or so.

Suzanne: So, tell me a little more about your projects in Bladensburg and the Port Towns.

John Giannetti: I was the president of the Prince George's Jaycees at the time. I've always been interested in history and in particular, the history of Bladensburg. I always thought there was a lot of history there that a lot of people didn't know anything about. So, I called the president of the Prince George's County Historical Society. At the time, it was Mr. Paul Lanham. I asked him, I said, "Is there any kind of project the Jaycees could be involved in? You know, it's still a long way from the bicentennial, but a lot of times it takes a long time to plan these things out." I said, "If you could come up with any projects?" He said, "Well, as a matter of fact, the old George Washington House was going to be torn down and they were going to put an Arby's roast beef sandwich shop

there.” He said, “It would really be great if maybe the Jaycees could do something to save that old building.” I went to the next society meeting and it was amazing. I met Mrs. Susanna Cristofane, who was the mayor of Bladensburg at that time. I remember her coming up to me at the time and saying, “Oh if you could do something to save the old tavern, we’d really be happy.” And, “I’ll do anything I can to help you.” She was as good as her word, because she really got behind the effort, helping the Jaycees meet business men in the community. She had been in Bladensburg since she was a small child and loved the history of Bladensburg. We had a lot in common. She helped me very much. We formed a committee and decided the best way to go about it was to try to buy the building from the current owner. Now, she had been offered a lot more money from this business concern that was going to build a commercial establishment. But, we pointed out that we wanted to try to save the history. This wonderful woman, Florance Morgan, owned the place. We went to her and told her about our plans to save the old building, to try to fix it up, and maybe make a museum out of it. She really liked that idea. We offered her what we thought we might be able to raise. We didn’t have one dollar towards that project at that time. We had raised a little bit of money, because we knew we were going to make her an offer. We had a couple thousand dollars. We gave her a deposit of a couple thousand dollars. She accepted it. All of this stuff is written down, incidentally, in the Prince George’s County Historical Society. We kept a book. As a matter of fact, that was the beginning of this project that lasted 4 or 5 years, culminating on the bicentennial. To make a long story short, we went around through the community and got more than 250 organizations to help raise money and support what we were doing. The project was a great success. We got a few politicians that got some money from the legislature. It wasn’t easy. It was like pulling teeth, but we were able to get the money, restore the house, build the museum, and we were open for the bicentennial on the birthday of Prince George’s County, which was April 23, 1976. Then we were ready for the bicentennial, like in the summer, July 4th. The museum was open. As far as the Jaycees were concerned, we won the number 1 award for the project in the whole United States. The national president came to our function to present us with this award down at the tavern. We had a pretty big occasion that day, with a lot of people there. He said there were something like 8,000 Jaycee chapters in the United States. Every chapter runs about 25 projects. To pick one project out of all those projects that were run was quite a thing. I remember him pointing that out. I was very proud of our organization, and we got a lot of support from a lot of people in the community. The Jaycees ran that little museum for a few years. But if you know anything about the Jaycees, once you have reached the age of 36 you have to phase out. You can no longer be a member. Once I left the organization, when I turned 36, which was ’76, the year of the bicentennial. I sort of kept my eye on the place. The Jaycees lost interest in it. It was going to be sold again for commercial reasons. They were going to break up the museum. A group of businessmen bought it. I went to the Chamber of Commerce and I asked if the Chamber of Commerce could help do something to help this museum and tavern. About 5 businessmen came forward and they chipped in the money that the Jaycees owed. They turned over the tavern to the businessmen, who then were going to give it to the town of Bladensburg. But the town of Bladensburg didn’t really want it. They didn’t want to have that burden of taking care of an old building. But just about that time, we got the money from the Amans. These businessmen turned it over to the Aman Trust, which then took care of the building.

We're still taking care of it and watching over it and maintaining it. In addition to that, we are doing other things in historic preservation in Bladensburg. That's basically a thumbnail sketch of what happened. There was a lot of work that went into building a really nice museum. That was another project in itself, just trying to come up with the proper history. We, talked to a lot of people, met a lot museum experts. It was really a very nice project as it turned out.

Suzanne: So, you were born in Mt. Rainer?

John Giannetti: Mt. Rainer. I was born at Georgetown Hospital in Washington D.C. I grew up in Mt. Rainer.

Suzanne: And you've been a resident all your life?

John Giannetti: Until recently, just a few months ago we moved. I was so involved in historic preservation. About 1983, I bought a historic house nearby, near the University of Maryland. It's only a quarter of a mile from campus. It was built in 1840. We called it Hitching Post Hill. Another name for it was Ash Hill. Hitching Post Hill had been the name that several previous owners. That's the name we used, when we lived there. It was a wonderful house. I raised my family there. Our daughter could've gone to the University of Maryland. She could have stepped out the door and she'd have been on campus. But she went to the University of Chicago a thousand miles away. I don't regret her doing that, because it's a wonderful school. My other son went to Bucknell University and my younger son went to the University of Maryland.

John gets a phone call

John Giannetti: I was just saying my son, Gregory, went to the University of Maryland, and I graduated. My brother graduated from there. My sister graduated from Maryland. Everybody went to Maryland except my daughter. My oldest son, John Giannetti Jr., he went to Bucknell, but he went to the University of Maryland Law School. He's currently an attorney. He was a politician, here, representing parts of Prince George's County. My youngest son, Gregory, is working in the business with me. He's a very talented sculptor, and great at this business. He has many of the similar characteristics that my father had, being a sculptor like my brother. Not everybody has that. He's also a musician and has a rock and roll band. He's very diversified. My other son graduated from Bucknell and went to Johns Hopkins Medical School. But he changed his mind after a year and decided that he wanted to be a politician, instead of a doctor. I encouraged him to go to law school, which he did and paid for it himself, worked his way through school and worked for us in the meantime. He went full time to law school. While he was still in law school, ran for the Maryland legislature. He lost the first election. He won the primary, beat the mayor of Laurel, but he lost to the incumbent delegate who was representing Laurel at that time. He was a republican, the only republican in Prince George's County. John ran 4 years later and beat him. He served 4 years in the Maryland House of Delegates and then he ran for the Maryland Senate and won that election.

Suzanne: So, why did you decide to stay in the area?

John Giannetti: In this area? Well, I had lived here all my life. My wife was president of the Prince George's Chamber of Commerce, first woman President incidentally. It's a year, you serve for a year. The Board of Directors elects one of their members to serve as president. She had worked for many years as public relations. But then she got on the Board of Directors. Then, they nominated her for President. We had a lot of ties to Prince George's County. I love county history, and joined the Historical Society back after I met Paul Lanham. I was an active member in the Historical Society. I've always been interested in history. I was determined I was going to stay here in Prince George's County. I bought this historic house, which I loved and enjoyed it. I begged my wife to let me buy it. I said, "Just let me stay there 5 years." We stayed there almost 25 years. It was an enormous place, a great big brick house, 2 acres. It really needed constant maintenance and upkeep and things like that. It was just getting very, very hard. She has not been real well, experiencing some health problems. We decided to try to scale down. We looked at different places. But we finally decided to move to one of these 55 and over senior communities down in Annapolis area. We're really very happy down there. We've only been there a few months. I hated to leave the county, but my business is still in Prince George's County. I'm still a member of the Prince George's Kiwanis Club. I still support county activities as much as I can. I haven't gotten involved in Anne Arundel County yet, but I've been reading about the history. It's really interesting where we live. We just had to scale down and we got a much smaller place.

Suzanne: What is your favorite childhood story associated with Bladensburg or the Port Towns, Cottage City, Colmar Manor, Edmonston.

John Giannetti: Well, I can remember riding my bicycle down to the Peace Cross. Actually, the Peace Cross was a great cross-roads before they had these big highways. You had to go through the Peace Cross almost to get anywhere from Mt. Rainer or Brentwood or even Hyattsville. You almost always had to go through Bladensburg. I can remember riding my bicycle down there, when I was a kid and I saw on the side of this old building, it said: George Washington House, 1732. I was always interested. I asked my mother what that building was about. She said, well, George Washington slept there and it was an old building and it was a tavern where a lot of travelers used to stop in the old days. I remember being interested in it from the time I was about 12 or 13 years old. I remember that place. Bladensburg a few years later in the '50s... That whole area used to flood tremendously. I mean every time you had a rain storm, it would flood. I can remember stories coming back from the beach when it had rained that day. You couldn't get through there. You had to go some other way. It had flooded literally maybe waist deep. It's interesting they built some levees along the sides of the creek there to stop the water from flooding, and it worked. Which incidentally, the same organization that restored the tavern, the Prince George's Jaycees, that was one of their first projects, to try to do something to stop Bladensburg from flooding. They won a national award, as well, back when the chapter first started. It's kind of interesting that we went back to Bladensburg 25 or 30 years later. But the point was, I was very familiar with Bladensburg. We knew some people, some very close friends that lived near the Dueling

Grounds. They called them the Bladensburg Dueling Grounds. Actually, what you'd now call Colmar Manor. When I was just a little kid, I would be over visiting my friends, and this one husband of the couple was telling me all about the history and how they used to have duels down there. He had a house, the closest house, right to the dueling grounds. I was really fascinated by that history. Of course, later I learned about the Battle of Bladensburg. But there wasn't even a single marker or anything about the Battle of Bladensburg. I always felt the history was sort of lost there. There is a historical marker at the Dueling Grounds now and one at the tavern. But the Battle of Bladensburg is still sort of unremarked. But there was a terrific battle right at that bridge, right there in Bladensburg, and a lot of British soldiers died trying to cross that bridge and a lot of Americans trying to stop them. The Marines incidentally, Marines and sailors put up quite a defense there. A lot of people think it was a disgraceful battle, but actually we were sort of unprepared to fight a veteran British army that had just come back from fighting Napoleon over in France. So, we retreated. The Marines didn't retreat. They held and counterattacked. It's sort of something worth telling. My idea was to try to tell this story. I've been interested in the history since I was a kid.

Suzanne: What's your favorite landmark or historic site?

John Giannetti: Well, of course, the tavern is where I put all my effort and interest in there for years and years. My wife said, my gosh it's like a graveyard, it's perpetual care. You know what I'm saying, a cemetery, you got to keep taking care of it. I just am still involved in it. But there is no question about it. The tavern is my favorite landmark. But I mean, the battle area where the Battle of Bladensburg took place and the Dueling Grounds are very interesting to me, all the many, many duels that were fought there. It's truly an amazing history.

Suzanne: What's your favorite non-historic spot?

John Giannetti: Well, we used to go roller skating up at the Bladensburg Roller Skating Rink. But that's gone. You know, the Cristofanes lived at Bostwick. They were very close friends, and dear, dear friends. But that's historic. I don't know. I guess Bladensburg itself. I just have a love for the history and the fact that it was such an interesting place 200 years ago.

Suzanne: What do you think others should learn about the town's history?

John Giannetti: Well, there is indeed a great deal of history there. I mean from the earliest times. Many people don't realize that river used to be a port where ships actually came in and departed from Bladensburg and went all the way to England. They would bring in cargos and there is so much history there. The more we delve into the history, things we don't even know about. For example, one of the things we did was hire a historian, John Walton, Jr., to try to find out some of the history. I'll never forget the night he came to my home and he said, "John I have got something to tell you, and it's very serious." I came over, and he said, "I don't think George Washington ever slept in the tavern." I go, "What? You've got to be kidding." It turned out that that building that

we called the George Washington House was actually a commercial building. Right in our parking lot was the Indian Queen Tavern, the next property. But so many people associated to the building that's there now, the George Washington House, they started calling it the Indian Queen Tavern. Somebody came along, a famous artist, Claghorn, and did a wonderful painting of the building that's there and named it the *Old Indian Queen*. There was this mystique or mystery associated with the place. It was kind of interesting. I was saying, "Well listen, if George Washington stayed in our parking lot, that's close enough for me." We kept promoting this thing. George Washington slept here... Thomas Jefferson. All these guys when they were on their way to Philadelphia. They had to stop in Bladensburg to spend the night, cause you could only go from Alexandria to Bladensburg in one day. It took all day to do that. There was no Washington at that time. It didn't exist. Bladensburg was a very important commercial center on the post road and the stagecoach stop. I think there was so much history there. We were shocked that George Washington didn't stay there. But then we found out that there was a guy, the second owner of the tavern, was the first American to ever put up a hot air balloon. That was part of the history too, that we didn't know anything about. We kind of stumbled on that. We uncovered some interesting history, during our project.

Suzanne: OK. Let me change tones a little bit. How do you feel about the term Port Towns? Is it an effective tool in drawing history to the community?

John Giannetti: Yeah. I kind of like it. I think it's a neat idea. I don't know who came up with it. But it certainly was a port town, even into Washington was still considered Bladensburg. You know, Bladensburg went all the way to what is now Florida Avenue. The Bladensburg Post Office delivered mail to now what is now D.C. But that is all considered Bladensburg, so all of Fort Lincoln, that whole area.

Suzanne: How do you feel about the term Port Towns?

John Giannetti: I think that whole thing was considered part of Bladensburg. It encompasses more of than just the town itself. I like the idea of Port Town.

Suzanne: What was area history like before the term Port Towns?

John Giannetti: You mean before they named it the Port Towns?

Suzanne: Yeah, about 10 or 20 years ago.

John Giannetti: Well, I guess the Jaycees gave a lot of impetus to looking at the history. We had this real interesting museum. We had like 20 dioramas in there that were really interesting. It told a lot about the history. I always felt we kept our history under a bushel basket. It was like we were hiding our history. I felt it was an interesting history that we ought to know more about it. That's why we put the emphasis on getting school children to come. We went to all the schools in the general area. They raised money to help pay for some of the exhibits. We put their name on the exhibits, certain schools that raised money and organizations. It was amazing how everybody jumped in and helped. There

were literally about 250 different groups. I mean some were as small as the Duvall Society. Just all kinds of groups donated money, helped us raise money. Antique arts associations went out and raised 4,000 or 5,000 dollars. That's a lot of money for our little group to get it started. But we couldn't get it going until we showed some progress. I was talking to one of the politicians, Louis Goldstein, I don't know whether you knew him, he was the comptroller of Maryland. I was bemoaning the fact that we couldn't seem to get off square one. I said we need some money to start the restoration. This is before we got a grant from the state. He said, "Well, go over to Suburban Trust, the bank and tell them you want to borrow 10,000 dollars for this project." He said, "Tell them I sent you." And tell them also, "They have to renew their charter every year with me. They better make that loan." I thought he was sort of half kidding, in a way. But these banks have to participate in the community. I went over to Suburban Trust and talked to a couple of vice-presidents in charge of loans. I mentioned ahead of time that I was coming, that Louis had advised me to come. Then, I said we wanted to start this restoration project. They said we didn't have any collateral. We did purchase the building from this lady and we were just paying her so much a month. Well we had to raise that money, like 1,500 dollars a month. They said, "Well maybe we'll think about lending you the money." I mentioned this fact that they had to get their charter renewed every year, that Louie Goldstein had mentioned that to me. They called me a half an hour later and said, "You could come by and pick up the check." In other words the business community got behind us. Then, Citizen's Bank got behind us in a big way, another bank. With these banks and the prestige of the owners, they're all Prince Georgians. Bob Sherwood, who grew up in Mt. Rainer, was the president of Suburban Trust. A.H. Smith, who grew up in Riverdale, he was the owner of Citizen's Bank. He got behind us in a big way, really helped us a lot. That's what I think was neat, because people started getting interested in the history. But, the hardest thing we had to do was convince the Town Council in Bladensburg that they ought to get behind us. They did to some extent. But see, they're dealing with tax payer's money, and they didn't want to jump in with both feet. Susanna did all she could, the Mayor. But we had a difficult time. We wanted to give the whole thing to the city of Bladensburg, but they didn't want to take. Now, they have the Bostwick House. We did convince them to do that, through the Aman Trust. See, we tried to get it through the Aman Trust, the Bostwick House. We couldn't get it. But when the town of Bladensburg, the mayor, Harrington...He was a mover and a shaker. He went down to the legislature and said, "Well, if you won't give it to the Aman Trust, well give it to the town of Bladensburg." Well, all the politicians got right behind that. That's how they got the thing. Of course, we were 100% behind them to do that. But the old problem still exists they don't know what do they do with it, in a certain sense. I don't mean to criticize. They're trying to do the best they can. I think the former Mayor did a lot to try to promote history. I think that's where we're heading to. Eventually, if we keep it up, we'll eventually get where we want. But it's hard for a city government to restore historic landmarks and things like that. It's just a difficult thing to do. OK, maybe I'm getting off the subject. But I think though, the town councilmen are kind of responsible to the citizens for picking up the trash, making sure the streets are lit, have street lights, and the streets are fixed. When it comes to trying to do something like historic preservation, it's sort of an odd thing. It's very difficult to get people at this level, politicians at this level of government, really excited about doing something like this,

because they have a limited amount of money to deal with and they don't want to overburden a town. That's why I think groups like the Aman Trust can come in and fill that vacuum. The town really hasn't been able to do anything with Bostwick. It's kind of slow moving, and we'd like to see it speed up. Maybe we can do that, by bringing in maybe the University of Maryland and organizations like this. They could see, "Wait a minute if Maryland comes in that's really something." That's pretty prestigious to get the University to be involved in it, to get people like you interested in the history and that sort of thing. That's what we're angling for, that's what we're hoping.

Suzanne: How have gender roles changed in the community?

John Giannetti: Well, I can remember when all of the politicians in Prince George's County were men. My mother was very, very active in local politics. I mean at the level of Mt. Rainer government. She never ran for town council or anything like that. But she belonged to the Democratic club, my mother and father. But my mother was a more getting involved kind of person. Her name was Bruna Giannetti. My father was George Giannetti. My mother was always the Secretary, taking notes at all these political meetings. All of the men, the old timers, let's see if I can remember some of those guys names. They were judges. Blair Smith was one of our neighbors. He was States Attorney. There were a lot of people at this level in Prince George's County. Our house was precinct headquarters. The polling place for Mt. Rainer was across the street. The point that I'm leading to, my mother was always actively involved with these organizations but never came forward. The first person that came forward was the congress woman, Gladis Spellman. She was congresswoman. They named the highway after her, out there on Baltimore Washington Parkway. She was the first women to run for public office in Prince George's County. We included her in the museum, the history of women, because, really, the women always played a part of taking care of these plantations. I mean actually the women had to do as much work, if not more, than some of the men in running plantations that surrounded this area, tobacco plantations and things like that. She progressed through the County Council, but this was before the County Council. It was called the Board of County Commissioners. She ran for County Commissioner. Then, she was on the County Council. Then, she ran for Congress and she was elected to Congress, first woman. She was a pretty remarkable person. Incidentally, she was a big supporter of our project as well, helping wherever she could. Then there were people like my wife, for example, who were the first woman president of the Chamber of Commerce. Now, for many, many years, it had always been men, I mean for like 50 years, you know. She sort of helped break that gender thing. Then of course, Susanna Cristofane was the mayor of Bladensburg. She was a woman, and was very active and beloved in the county. Everyone loved Susanna. Then, her daughter followed up, young Susanna. She also, was very active, and did a wonderful job following up, like her mother. Pauline Mennis was another person in the legislature. She served for almost 40 years in the legislature. These were the first women to really take a leading role in the county. In the Red Cross, several women were in Hyattsville. I can't remember their names either right off the top of my head. They were actively involved in the Red Cross. I know my mother was active in the Democratic Club in Prince George's County, in Mt. Rainer here, the Mt. Rainer Democratic Club. They started working, and worked their way right out through. They

always supported the local politicians. There was sort of an in-group. There was not question about. Herbert Reichelt...and Hervey Machen, was a Congressman. All of these people sort of added to running the county. But I think they ran it in a good way. They included a lot of people. Pretty soon, they started introducing some Black candidates, African American candidates. They started getting elected in the county. But there was a time when there wasn't a single Black elected official in the county. I can remember that. Even here at the local level in Mt. Rainer, on the town council. Brentwood always had North Brentwood, which was a Black community. They were very active and always had a well organized group down there in North Brentwood. I can remember growing up in this area and there were very few Black families at all. There were none in Mt. Rainer. Then things started to change, little by little, and people's attitudes changed. It became a much more integrated community. It's kind of interesting history, just on that topic alone. A lot of people think the busing issue had a lot to do with it and it probably did. This Judge Kauffman felt because the schools weren't really integrated, back years ago. In Prince George's County, you know, you had White schools and Black schools. Then things started to change. There was a lot of dissention in the county. A lot of people moved out, and started moving out in droves, fleeing the county. But I think that pretty much, things held pretty much together. We've got a great county. I still love Prince George's County. I was always proud of being a Prince Georgian. I'm still associated with it even though I moved over to the next county over, Anne Arundel.

Suzanne: So, how do children fit into the story? Do children who grew up here stay here?

John Giannetti: That's tricky. When I went into the Marine Corps, I moved from Mt. Rainer. I went into the Marine Corps. I was still at the University of Maryland and I married a local girl from Cheverly. She lived in the area, so we bought a house in Berwyn Heights. Berwyn Heights was a very nice little community, and that's where we had my two sons were. But unfortunately, this was about the time of the women's lib. She was supporting some candidate. The Vietnam War was going on. There was a lot of dissention. Her brother followed my footsteps. I was an officer in the Marine Corps. I was an Infantry Officer. I sort of served on the east coast and we went to the Mediterranean and the Caribbean to do our various overseas duty. Vietnam was just sort of starting up. I got out in '66 after serving for 3 years of active duty and Vietnam was just really starting to kick in. There had been a lot of Marines in her family. Her brother joined the Marine Corps and became a Marine Officer, went through all the training that I went through, the exact same program, went to Vietnam and inside a month he was killed. This changed her whole outlook on the way the war was being fought or whether we even belonged over there in the first place. Being a Marine Officer and being associated with everything that was going on, including what was starting to happen in Vietnam, I was very much of a hawk, you might say, on the war. When her brother died, she really became one of these anti-war. A number of the girls were working for Royal Heart, who was the peace candidate. He was running against Hervey Machen, who voted for the war. He was supporting what the president was trying to do. They knocked off Hervey Machen in the primary. She was going to work on Capital Hill, but she had to beat the Republican, Larry Hogan. He came along and knocked off Roy Harp, because this

guy Larry Hogan was a one hell of a candidate and really was a hard hitting guy. He beat Royal Heart. She was very disappointed.

John gets a phone call

John Giannetti: It was a tragedy of the first magnitude as far as I was concerned. A lot of this Vietnam stuff and the Women's Lib Movement had something to do with it. To make a long story short, she moved to another area in Maryland. Then, I met another girl a couple of years later and got married. She raised my boys, a stepmother. The first wife took an active part in raising the kids. We shared visitation and that sort of thing. That's really where I probably had the time to spend on that project. That's how I got involved. I ran for president of the Jaycees. Winnie Kelly, I don't know if you know Winnie Kelly. Winnie Kelly was the previous president. To be the president of the Jaycees was a big step for me. I had all this time on my hands. We developed this project. Then, along the way I met my present wife. We have been married now for 35 or 36 years. The boys lived in Hitching Post Hill, worked for Maryland University. My other son went to Bucknell University, the oldest son. But anyway, that's how the kids got involved. Then, we had a daughter. My wife and I had a daughter, Margo. My son got involved in politics, because number one we had a lot of connections in Prince George's County. I served on the Democratic Central Committee. I ran for the House of Delegates. I didn't win. But I ran, and he was helping me campaign and all. I think that helped him get excited about politics. That's really what he wanted to do. He did very well in college, at Bucknell. He had a wonderful grade point average and all of that stuff. He got accepted to Johns Hopkins Medical School. That's what he wanted. It isn't an easy thing to do. If you can get there, that's all you have to do, wait it out. He just felt he wanted to do something else. Your patients are your most important thing. He just felt, politics was more involved. It started with my mother and father being involved in politics...me being involved in politics. My sister was a school teacher in Prince George's County and knew a lot of people...my involvement in the Jaycees. I got to know all the politicians. We got money from the legislature. It was almost a natural thing that he would go into politics. He did, and he did very, very well. But when you're in politics and you make certain votes, sometimes everybody doesn't agree with what you're trying to do. You have this vision of what you think ought to be done. If you think the ICC would be a wonderful road to come through from Montgomery to Prince George's, there's a lot of voters up along that route that don't think it's such a good idea, because it's going to take away their home. That's what he got caught up in. He's now out of office. But I don't think you've heard the last of John Giannetti Jr. I think he's still interested in politics. He's over in Anne Arundel now. He moved to Annapolis. I think that he's going to be involved over there. I think the interest in the community helped him with his community. He took a little different turn. He's a real smart kid, got straight A's. That's why we kept saying, "Well, if you're so smart, why don't you become a doctor?" I knew some doctors and they said, "Sure, bring him over to the hospital." They gave him a little job in the summer. He would follow the doctors around to different departments. I met these doctors through the Kiwanis Club. They were members. They sort of took John under their wing. Real smart kid. He just absolutely loved it. Really, he started going into actual operating rooms. He watched maybe 40 or 50 operations. He was right there. Not

necessarily assisting, but watching, seeing how they wanted to do it. He applied for pre-med and went right through with flying colors. Applied to Johns Hopkins and got accepted. But somewhere along the line, he had a change of heart. My son Gregory is totally different breed. Also, he is a very smart young man grade wise. Went through college, just with sort of like a breeze. I never saw one of his papers. I never saw him study. I don't know how he did it. He just did it, you know what I mean. He played football. Going through the School of Architecture first, then switched to another major. It's amazing, you know. That's what they're involved in. My daughter, again, she's involved in civic things. She was just the president from the American Association of University Women, AAUW, something like that. My sister was a former president. She brought Margo into the group. Margo is 27. She joined this group. She went to the first meeting and made her Secretary. I said, "Oh my God, they saw you coming." Anyway, then she became President, served 2 or 3 terms. Now, she's just on the board. The children are actively involved in the community. I think it's just something that's in our blood. Their mother was active with the Chamber of Commerce. My wife was active with the Chamber of Commerce. We did our thing for many, many years. Now, we're kind of like coasting a little bit, time to take it easy. You had another question?

Suzanne: How is the town connected to other communities? Transportation? Business cooperation?

John Giannetti: Like I had mentioned earlier, everything had to be funneled through Bladensburg and Mt. Rainer. US 1 came right through Mt. Rainer. I've always been amazed that this area hasn't developed like, say Roslyn, over there in Virginia. Roslyn used to be a lot like Mt. Rainer. It's right on the District, on the other side of the river over in Virginia. But here's Maryland, Mt. Rainer, Bladensburg just 20 minutes from downtown. I don't think there's anything more than a 2 story building anywhere around here. I think in the future people are going to see how close we are strategically located, if you look at all the main highways going north. Of course, the Old Post Road went right through Bladensburg and then up through Hyattsville and then up through US 1, that was the old US 1. Now, Rhode Island Avenue is US 1. As far as transportation network, that's where it runs. Then, next to it, you have the Baltimore Washington Parkway, which was the main road north in the '50s, started about 1950, completed in '52 or '54. When that road was first put in, the Baltimore Washington Parkway, I mean, we used to just get in our cars and just drive the Parkway. That was such a neat thing, go up to Baltimore, turn around, and come back. I mean, here was a superhighway. Now, they have 95. You have 95, US 1, the Baltimore Washington Parkway. It's the main artery going north. There is a lot of industrial area around this area and further over toward Bladensburg. But I really think, we are so close to downtown Washington that somebody is going to open their eyes and really see what a wonderful opportunity to really to say Silver Spring. But see, the people fought it. Silver Spring was exactly like Mt. Rainer is today, back in the '50s. I remember her going to a meeting and saying, "Well, they want to put a big Hecht company down there right there at 34th and Rhode Island. But everybody was speaking out against it. She said, "I think it would be a great idea." Well, there was so much opposition to development in Mt. Rainer, that they decided put it over in Silver Spring. They built the Hecht company over there. The next thing you know, they built other

buildings. Silver Spring has that great big Discovery. They built a great big high rise. I mean it's all fully developed. Mt. Rainer is the same as it was 50 years ago, because those people stopped it and they didn't want the development. I think that was a big mistake. Believe me, I had to fight for the metro. We were the last people to get metro. Over in Montgomery County, they had it right away. They saw the potential there. I was a Town Councilman in Berwyn Heights. We would go to a town councilman meeting and there would be like 2 or 3 people at the meeting, maybe 4 at the most. We were discussing these important problems like picking up the trash and fixing the roads and different things like that. College Park didn't want the metro. I said, "If they don't want the metro over there, why don't we have it in Berwyn Heights?" It'd be great. I wrote an article in our little newsletter in Berwyn Heights. My god, we had 300 and 400 people, standing room only coming to the meetings, because they didn't want metro coming to Berwyn Heights. I said, "Well, look how nice it would be. You could jump on the metro and ride right into Washington." I fought for that thing, because I really believed it would be a good idea. But here's the thing. That was so unpopular, next election I was thrown out of office. Here I was the main mover to get the metro in there. We got the Town Council to support it. We got the number of citizens that supported and thought it would be a great idea. But they fought it and they fought it and they fought. We were the last people to get metro. Now, they have a big, wonderful station right there in Berwyn Heights, up there in Greenbelt. You know it's the end of the line. It runs right through. They never actually put it in Berwyn Heights exactly, but that's where the route ran. College Park was supposed to go through the University of Maryland and over to College Park. Those people didn't want it.

Suzanne: Why didn't they want it?

John Giannetti: They didn't want it, because they thought people come out from the city and rob them. They just really felt that people would come out there, steal their television sets and I guess ride back on the metro with all the stuff. I shouldn't say that. It just seemed like they just didn't want to, just keep it away. They didn't want the progress. I mean it's a wonderful thing. You jump on the metro. You're downtown in 15 minutes, instead of all the hassle of driving. I remember saying at one of these meetings, I said, "Look, you may not believe it, but one of these days you're going to be spending like 2 dollars for a gallon of gasoline." Well, the whole place burst into laughter, "Oh ho, we'll never spend 2 dollars for a gallon of gasoline. That's ridiculous." Well, of course, we're up to 3 dollars now. Of course, we have the metro. Finally, we convinced the County Council to move it over our way. I mean there are a lot of reasons you don't get reelected. My wife didn't want me involved in this town thing. Politics, even at the local level, can be really taxing on a person. We had all these meetings all the time. I was involved in historic preservation, trying to restore the tavern, doing all these things. She wasn't behind the fact that I was getting more involved. That's the story about that. But I think Prince George's County is in the main transportation grid for north/south traffic. It always has been and it probably always will be. Because once you get over to Montgomery County, you go north, you go to Frederick. That's out west. The main corridor is north/south, straight up to Baltimore and Philadelphia, you know, Delaware and right up to Philadelphia. I think we're in an ideal situation here for big things to

happen in the next 50 years. I don't think I'll be here, but I really believe it will catch on... These little low buildings around here and residential houses. It will be like Roslyn. I know it will.

Suzanne: In what ways is history affecting the community and how has historical consciousness become a part of everyday activities? How do people relate to the history? Do people relate to the history?

John Giannetti: I don't think people pay much attention to the history. They just don't think that the history is all that important. Now, there is a certain segment of the population that is very interested in it. Some of my dearest friends are members of the historical society and these historic preservation groups and things like that. But unfortunately, I think people are so busy trying to make a living and getting on with their life and they don't have a lot of time. But I mean the river is still there in Bladensburg. I really believe these organizations, like the Anacostia Watershed Society, are trying to do a lot to reinvigorate the enthusiasm for the river. For a while there, I was trying to get my daughter interested in rowing. We were trying to get the University of Maryland to have a rowing team to come down on the Anacostia River and row. There are schools in Virginia. They have the Potomac. It's a little bigger setup. It just seems like people in general aren't paying much attention to history. I think it's a shame, because if you look at the history of this area, it was a very prosperous area. Why was it prosperous? Because we had all the roads of commerce coming through, the north/south roads. We just seemed to be more interested in getting into town, working government work. But, I think it could really have an effect... the location of Prince George's County, Bladensburg in particular, the Port Town areas could really blossom into a great area. People would appreciate the history more. Trying to hang on to the history, by telling people about it... I think people are always fascinated by it, but they just don't pay a lot of attention to it. It's hard promoting history.

Suzanne: How have issues of race factored into history?

John Giannetti: Well, of course there were slaves in Prince George's County from the earliest times. At the time of the Civil War, there were as many slaves as free people in Prince George's County. It was almost 50/50. Even at the time of the Civil War. Because Prince George's County was always dragging its feet when it came to integration. They fought it really. When I was a kid, you never saw any Black people on the street. You saw them when you went into Washington. I think little by little the old timers faded away. I went to school in Washington. I went to Archbishop High School in Washington. Archbishop John Carroll, another historical figure incidentally. Maybe about 5% to 7% of the class was African American. They were great athletes. I played right along side of these guys, and they became my friends and they're still my friends. John Thompson was one of my classmates. I can remember the first day he came to the school. You know who John Thompson is? He's a local. He was a coach at Georgetown. He was a great athlete in high school, college, and the pro-ranks, and then became a famous coach. He's in the Hall of Fame for basketball. I got acclimated to the fact that African Americans were part of our society that I had never really known. I had never really knew anybody in all my

schools around here. There were never really any Black people involved. Growing up, I just didn't know anybody until I went to high school over in D.C. That's where I was first exposed to this. I realized they're just like anybody else. They're very smart, great athletes, that kind of thing. I always tried to raise my kids on those kinds of lines. I don't know how else to express it. I can remember in Mt. Rainer. I had a little job at the drug store over here, Twiggs Pharmacy, and I'd deliver prescriptions. First on bicycle, and then I kept the job. It was a wonderful job. I made 75 cents an hour. I thought I was really a millionaire. Then, I started driving. But there was a guy that had a house right next to us there. He didn't like the idea of African Americans coming into Mt. Rainer. He was very much against anything like that. I can remember him ranting and raving about this happening. There were a lot of people in the county that were like that, unfortunately. They wouldn't allow it. This building next door here, we bought it a few years ago. It had a covenant on it. It was built in 1935. The covenant said, "Whoever owns this building couldn't never sell it or lease or rent it to an African American." Of course, those covenants all went by the wayside. When we bought it, that covenant was still a part of the original deal. That's not enforced or anything like that, but that's how people thought. You couldn't even rent your house. You couldn't sell the building to a Black person. It would've been illegal. That's how the county was. I think our county had a lot of old communities, well established. Growing up in Mt. Rainer, in this area, I thought it was a wonderful life. I really thought it was great. We had boys clubs, lots of athletes, and things like that ...athletics to get involved in. But there were never any Black kids, at all, growing up. Once this movement started and a lot of these old timers started passing away. They were so against it. Then that Judge had that thing with the schools, forced integration. That really changed everything. A lot of people moved out of the county. I know at least 10 people, who left for that reason, went to Howard County or Anne Arundel. I always thought it was a great county and I still do. But I left, because we had to scale down, get a smaller place. We found a place that my wife really liked. That's why we bought it.

Suzanne: What history is underrepresented in the community? What is overlooked?

John Giannetti: Colonial history, really. People have lost sight of the fact that these giant ships would come into Bladensburg. Up in Mystic Seaport, Connecticut, they have the old sea port there. Down in Virginia, they seem to take their history and make it a part of the community, more so than here. Here, we're more commercial...tear down an old place, put up a little cinderblock building, so you can have a little business. They don't seem to be historically oriented. That was always one of my biggest frustrations. That was the whole reason for trying to build a museum, trying to make people more aware of the history. I am still involved in that. The Bostwick House...Maybe we can do something here. Try to restore the old market square in Bladensburg. Trying to get people to remember what it was like. Over in Virginia, I think they've done a wonderful job. I was just down in Williamsburg a couple weeks ago. Some friends invited us down there. It's amazing, they had considered Bladensburg. The Rockefeller Foundation had considered Bladensburg before they picked Williamsburg. But because there was this traffic coming through, north/south traffic and the commercialization, they just thought, "Maybe, it would just be impossible to bring it off." But it was close to the nation's

capital. I just think it would just be wonderful to keep history in perspective, mainly our early colonial history. Yes, we had a slave oriented society, but these people contributed to the growth of the county and helped the economy. They liked the county. In the historical society, we have people whose ancestors were actual slaves in the county. They're interested in the history and are trying to do more about Black history, trying to save the little churches and the schools. I really think that is important to weave that in to the whole fabric of the county. But unfortunately it's a very difficult thing to do here, especially.

Suzanne: Do you think history can contribute to revitalization?

John Giannetti: Well, yeah that's what I'm saying. I think this whole thing would contribute to the revitalization of the area. You have these historic trails. There are a million things to do in New Orleans, but I want to go visit the historic houses and I want to see some of the things that have tours and things like that. We've got more assets here, historical assets in Prince George's County that could bring in tourism. Tourism is a wonderful tool for the economy, if we just spent a little bit more time trying to weave the history into the community. We're doing a pretty good job. I think that things are progressing. They're restoring these wonderful houses all around. Eventually that will be part of a tour, a historic tour. I don't know the name, some kind of historic pathway tour.

Suzanne: The Anacostia Heritage Trail.

John Giannetti: Yeah. They're trying to develop that. It's a great idea. They're a lot of people from other parts of the country that come here and want to participate in that kind of thing. I think we have got to devote money to do that. It's not just the government. You've got to get people interested in it, businessmen. Once you do, you can't depend on governments to do everything, in my opinion. They've got enough headaches as it is. They certainly can help...By helping with the restoration of these houses, to save Bostwick. It was built 1746 or '42. It's a pretty old house there. You know, that's really an interesting thing there. There were slaves there. Tell them the whole history. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Those slaves came from Africa and it presented them a new life. Yes, it was slavery, but in a way it was a better life maybe than they came from. I don't know. They've thrived here. I think it's a wonderful history. I think once people realize the historical value of this area, they'll see the economic advantages of trying to develop an area. If you go to New York City, into Manhattan, everything is lost. There was a lot of history down there in Manhattan. Now all you see are these big buildings of the modern world. But there were a lot of interesting things that happened there. I guess that's what's going to happen here. You've got to save your historic landmarks. It's absolutely essential in the development of the community. I think people like to see the old tavern. I've been looking at it for more than 65 years. If I went by there and it wasn't there, what a shock it would be. It is reassuring when you save these old buildings. It makes you think about history and that's what you've got to do. You don't want to forget about it. You can learn from history is basically what I'm saying. It can be very educational and you can learn a lot of lessons.

Suzanne: What economic changes have occurred in the past 10 to 20 years? Have businesses moved out? Wages risen?

John Giannetti: Well, sure, this whole area was once residential. But because it's so close to Washington, some of these old communities are now being converted into industrial areas. But there's revitalization right there in Hyattsville. They're building all those townhouse along US 1. One of the local politicians was by here and was saying, "We have this arts studio here, and we've been here for more than 40 years now." And he said, "You know, you guys were the reason this whole Arts District thing sort of popped up. You were the first ones." That's good that we have an Arts District. You need history and you need the arts. The rental space is a lot less here, than it would be in Montgomery County or something. You couldn't afford to have an Arts District over there, because it's the high rent district. I think what has happened is, we've got a lot of industrialization, but not maybe the kind of development we really should be trying to have, office buildings and that kind of stuff, condos. They'll be coming. I guarantee it, because we are 20 minutes from downtown Washington, from the heart of Washington, less than 10 miles... Got a good metro system... We are laying the foundation for the development of this area, no question about it.

Suzanne: In what respects is Bladensburg unique?

John Giannetti: Well, Bladensburg was the first town in this whole area. Everything else around the Port of Bladensburg were farmers, up to Hyattsville, all of Mt. Rainer, all of Colmar Manor and Cottage City and up where Ft. Lincoln was up on that high hill, and over there where Ft. Lincoln development. All of that area was farms. The important part of that whole thing was the river, because the river was the main highway, even though there were some post roads running north and south. That river was the main source of everything. I think it still could be. Not the river itself, but the transportation system of this whole area. The importance of Bladensburg was it was the first community. It was recognized by the state, the colony, actually province of Maryland recognized Bladensburg. They had a post office there. They had these ships coming in, a port of entry. They had tobacco inspection stations. Low and behold they had slave trading in Bladensburg. There were a lot of rough places in Bladensburg. During the Civil War, you could always go down there find a bar or a tavern where you could get a drink. But then, it started fading away when the river silted up. Bladensburg lost its importance. They were going to set the Navy Yard here at Bladensburg, right there where Bostwick is, in that general vicinity. The Secretary of the Navy, George Washington, was saying, "Well, pick out a place where we could have the Navy Yard for Washington, the Department of the Navy. Well, they chose down off the Anacostia River, down at the mouth of the Anacostia. But they looked up here in Bladensburg. They thought, "Well, maybe that would have been a good place to have it." Consequently, they might have kept the river from silting up. The erosion from all these tobacco fields and everything went into the river and just filled it up. The river is really just nothing but a creek now. But it was very, very important. It was an integral cog in the wheel of this general area. It was a very prosperous agricultural area. Everything funneled through Bladensburg. George Calvert had this big estate up here with 1,000s of acres... The whole University of Maryland.

Where my home was, the Calverts sold off 1,000 acres to that guy. He had a big farm up there in the 1840s and '50s all the way up through the Civil War. It was just an agricultural area and everybody funneled everything through Bladensburg. It was the only main town. I don't know whether I've answered any of your questions. But I think it's an interesting thing.

Suzanne: Anything else you want to comment about? The Port Towns or the general area?

John Giannetti: It's a shame. We still ought to have a county museum, a permanent building. Up in College Park, they have the College Park Airport, which is wonderful. It really is a great thing. But I really think it would be helpful to have a county museum. Maybe, Bladensburg wouldn't be the ideal place, but there was more happening in Bladensburg than Upper Marlboro or some of the other places. There are places like Laurel or Bowie, really big towns, commercial centers. But I think if we had a county museum, a permanent thing, it would really be beneficial to keep reminding people of the history that took place here: the Battle of Bladensburg, the Dueling Grounds, the balloon ascensions that are associated with the county, NASA, and all of that. All of this is wonderful history...The plantation system that we had here in the county where they grew tobacco. It was a very prosperous area. Some of the big beautiful homes, they built them because they were making big bucks. They've just restored one of the most beautiful houses in the county, Bowieville, I don't know if you've seen it, but Bowieville is down near Largo in that general area. That was a big tobacco plantation right up into the '50s, maybe even later. I think it would be nice to have it. That's what I'd really like to see. Maybe, it could still happen in Bladensburg. A county museum that's what I'd like to see.