

ABSTRACT: Josef Brown was a resident of Bladensburg during his childhood and as a young adult. He lived in a large house, now demolished, which was across the street from the George Washington House on Alternate Rt. 1. Josef remembers many of the businesses and residences in Bladensburg that are now gone. His stories are particularly telling of what town life was like. Josef Brown expresses his memories of Bladensburg and some of the issues of the town.

Josef Brown on his house in Bladensburg: It was a very large house. It had a bar on the first floor, which had been built by my grandparents, the house and the bar. Next to it was the store, and next to that was a warehouse, with a synagogue above the warehouse. The house by today's standards was very unusual, because it had seven bedrooms and one bathroom. By today's standards, that would be unheard of, not only one bathroom for seven bedrooms, but also a house with seven bedrooms. It had, because it was an old house, in addition to a gas stove, a wood burning, big, black cast iron stove that a lot of cooking was done on. It was a pretty large piece of property that it sat on. It ran to Baltimore Avenue to 46th Street. On the property, on the north side, were coal bins, because we sold coal. There were many barns. The barns were never used for anything during my lifetime, other than my father stored the car and the truck in there. A fellow handyman, who worked for us, lived in one of the outbuildings. There was an outhouse out there that was never used. We would play, as a kid, in one of the lofts in the barn. When I was young in Bladensburg, it was still pretty much country. It wasn't until after the war that it started becoming suburban.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Virta, Alan. *Prince George's County: A Pictorial History*. The Donning Company Publishers, 1998.

Location: Prince George's County Library, Hyattsville MDR 975.251 V

Walton, J.M. *A Brief History of the George Washington House*. Bladensburg, MD, 1974.

Location: Prince George's County Historical Society

Young, J.M. "Notes on the Archaeology and History of the George Washington House. Crownsville, MD: Maryland Historical Trust, 1972.

Location: Maryland Historical Trust; Call Number: PR155

Van Horn, R.Lee. *Out of the Past: Prince Georgians and Their Land*. Riversdale, MD: Prince George's County Historical Society, 1976.

Location: Prince George's County Library, Hyattsville, MDR 975.251



Josef Brown's Old House (Now Demolished)
Alternate Rt. 1, Bladnesburg



Chair Found During Floods
in Bladnesubrg



George Washington House, Bladensburg, MD



Anacostia River at Bladensburg
Waterfront Park, Bladensburg, MD

**Port Towns Interview Project
Suzanne Stasiulatis interviewing Josef Brown
Interview at 4004 Remington Ct. Hyattsville, MD
April 7, 2008**

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

Josef Brown: Josef Brown, age 73, and I currently live in Hyattsville, Maryland.

Suzanne: How long were you a resident of Bladensburg?

Josef Brown: From about a year old, until 35 years ago.

Suzanne: What is your occupation or previous occupation?

Josef Brown: I am now retired. I was a District Court Judge for the District Court of Maryland. Prior to that, I practiced law for 35 years.

Suzanne: But you still sit on the bench?

Josef Brown: Yes. They call it a Recall Judge.

Suzanne: What is your favorite childhood story related to Bladensburg?

Josef Brown: In an area that no longer exists the way it existed, there was a stream off of Upshur Street. The stream was frozen over and I was walking on the ice and I fell through the ice. My dog that was walking with me grabbed me by the collar and pulled me out. It was a Shepard.

Suzanne: Did people go ice skating around there?

Josef Brown: Farther back, there was an area to go ice skating. It was also in an area where an industrial area is now. They cleared out all of the swampy, watery areas. It was between what is now Kennilworth Avenue, which didn't exist, and the railroad tracks.

Suzanne: Was there anything else you did for fun?

Josef Brown: In the area that is between the median, just after you cross over the river on Alternate 1 from Hyattsville, there was a park there and we would play ball there all the time. I remember as a kid, there was a jailhouse there. They would call it the "Highwater Jail," because when it was high water they had to move the prisoners out when it flooded. I don't know if anyone mentioned to you the Peace Cross in relationship to floods.

Suzanne: Down by the railroad tracks it still floods.

Josef Brown: It would really flood by the Peace Cross. It would be up to my waist. I loved it when it flooded, because we lived on one side of the Peace Cross and the school was on the other side. When it flooded I didn't have school. The school didn't close, I just couldn't get there.

Suzanne: Did they reroute the traffic?

Josef Brown: They could go to Hyattsville, that direction. There was really no easy way to get around the flood. People would make money moving cars that got stuck in the flood. In fact, we have a chair in the other room that my parents or grandparents found floating in the flood. It is an antique. It is a very unusual chair. The story that goes along with it is that it was left over from the days when soldiers had swords. The chair is designed so that you can sit in it with a sword. You can sit in it whether you are left handed or right handed.

Suzanne: What was the point where they started doing something about it when it flooded?

Josef Brown: The Corps of Engineers was funded by Congress to build the levees that are along there. That was the major part. Then, they started dredging the river. The project was dedicated in July 1959.

Suzanne: If you were writing a history of Bladensburg what would you include...either about your life or the history of the area back to the Battle of Bladensburg?

Josef Brown: The Battle of Bladensburg from what I have read was a bit of an embarrassment for the Americans. They call it the "Bladensburg Races," because they ran so fast. It didn't delay them enough, because the British burned Washington.

I would say probably not enough has been written about the river. The river was very, very important in early times in a good way. In more modern times, it has been very negative, in ways, although, recently, they have done some very nice things.

Suzanne: From your point of view, what would you write about the history when you were growing up, important events and things?

Josef Brown: The only historic event that I remember growing up was the sesquicentennial celebration in Bladensburg. They had a big parade. There were people dressed up in colonial costume. That was a big deal. I was pretty young when that occurred. I was still living in the house across from the George Washington House. I was about 14 or under then.

Suzanne: Tell me about your house.

Josef Brown: It was a very large house. It had a bar on the first floor, which closed during prohibition and never reopened. It had been built by my grandparents, the house

and the bar. Next to it was the store, and next to that was a warehouse, with a synagogue above the warehouse. The house by today's standards was very unusual, because it had seven bedrooms and one bathroom. By today's standards, that would be unheard of, not only one bathroom for seven bedrooms, but also a house with seven bedrooms. It had, because it was an old house, in addition to a gas stove, a wood burning, big, black cast iron stove that a lot of cooking was done on. It was a pretty large piece of property that it sat on. It ran to Baltimore Avenue to 46th Street. On the property, on the north side, were coal bins, because we sold coal. There were many barns. The barns were never used for anything during my lifetime, other than my father stored the car and the truck in there. A fellow handyman, who worked for us, lived in one of the outbuildings. There was an outhouse out there that was never used. We would play, as a kid, in one of the lofts in the barn. When I was young in Bladensburg, it was still pretty much country. It wasn't until after the war that it started becoming suburban.

Suzanne: Were there a lot of farms?

Josef Brown: Yes. At the intersection of Edmonston Road and Rt. 450, where the bakery is now, that shopping center was an orchard. Sunnybrook was all woods. I remember, because as a cub scout I would go camping up there.

Suzanne: We want to know about history and development in the community. What were your experiences as a child or young adult in Bladensburg?

Josef Brown: The first thing that I remember occurring that started the change in Bladensburg, I remember the Safeway opened in Bladensburg. When I think about it, why would a Safeway open unless there were people who moved into the community? I don't know why or when that occurred. I remember Sunnybrook bringing a lot of people to Bladensburg, and then the apartments also. Growing up, there were no apartments in Bladensburg. Now, you have Cobur Terrace, Hilltop Manor, and the ones up by the high school. Those are of a recent vintage. I don't remember when the apartments were built. I do remember we lived in Cobur Terrace for a year, while our new house was being built up by Hilltop Manor. If I were to guess, where Cobur Terrace is, was either part of an orchard or another farm.

Suzanne: You lived across from the George Washington House. How did you see the house? Was it deteriorating...?

Josef Brown: People lived there. It was an active bar, or tavern. There were several active taverns. Bresnahan's Tavern was maybe a block north of our house. That was also called Palo Alto Tavern. But when I was growing up, it was called Bresnahan's. A lot of buildings in Bladensburg are gone now. The one where the shopping center is, across from the library, was a house I think was called Blenheim. I think that belonged to the Rodger's family. That was torn down. The hill was cut down. A shopping center was put in. I was excited about the shopping center, because in the back was a roller rink, which no longer exists. There was the Ross House, which was closer to the railroad tracks. That was moved to I think Hareford County. There were a couple of old churches, during my

lifetime they were Black churches. I don't know if they started out as Black churches. When I was a kid, there was one just south of our house, across from the George Washington House. I remember it was a two story church and it leaned. The other one was a block east of the railroad tracks and back.

Suzanne: The Free Hope Baptist Church? It's in an industrial park now?

Josef Brown: Yes. It's behind where Ernest Maier's is. There was also a big house on the property where Ernest Maier's business is. I think that might have been the Ross House. This house is gone. It was the back part of Ernest Maier's property. I think there was another house, west of the railroad tracks. I'm trying to think of some of the other buildings. There were two nightclubs: the Dixie Pig and the Del Rio. The Del Rio had big name entertainment and it burned one night, somewhere between '41 and '42. It was replaced by the Crossroads, but the Crossroads never had the style, the entertainment, or the character of the Del Rio. The new high school was built. When I went to high school, the high school was where the elementary school is now. I went there two years, 9th and 10th grade. 11th and 12th I was at the new high school. Where I went to 1st and 2nd grade is where the library is now. Where the barber school is, that was the fire department. Where Tire Land is, that was where the town commissioners met. It was a big building there. I remember it was used for a number of different things. One was for the town commissioners and the Boys Club used it, because I remember boxing there. The property belonged to my grandparents. That whole area, except for the George Washington House, has changed a lot. I don't think any of the houses are still there. First of all, it was not divided. The northbound lane was the only road. Behind the buildings, to the west, went all the way back to the river. I think the only thing left there, from my days there, is the George Washington House. Everything else is brand new, even though it's only been 40 years.

There were two years I went to high school in D.C., because the D.C. schools were better than Maryland. It was impossible to get to D.C. You had to take the bus from Peace Cross to Mt. Rainer, and a streetcar from Mt. Rainer to the school. You couldn't go down where Kenilworth Avenue goes. There was no road to get to Oxen Hill. You had to go into D.C., near Sears Roebuck, take Bladensburg Road till it ended and take another road to get to Oxen Hill. It was impossible to get to a lot of places in Bladensburg. You could get to Upper Marlboro. You could get to Hyattsville. You could get to D.C. It was difficult to get to Montgomery County. It was difficult to get to Oxen Hill.

Suzanne: How did you get those places, if you needed to get there?

Josef Brown: I just described how to get to Oxen Hill. To get to Montgomery County, you would come to University of Maryland and take a road called University Lane, which is now University Boulevard, and that would take you to Montgomery County.

The streetcar was interesting, because out here it had a trolley. When it got within a mile of the schools in D.C., they pulled down the trolley. There was someone in the pit, who connected an underground third rail to the trolley and then it went the rest of the way to

D.C., until you got out McArthur Boulevard when they did the opposite. To go to Glen Echo, they pulled the trolley up to the third rail.

Suzanne: Did you ride bikes a lot?

Josef Brown: Yes. That was the main way to get around.

Suzanne: When did you get your first car?

Josef Brown: When I started Law School at the University of Maryland. I did something very unusual. I went to the University of Maryland, lived at home, and I didn't have a car. I hitchhiked. Number 1: It's not safe for the hitchhiker. Number 2: It's not safe for the driver.

Suzanne: You moved to Bladensburg when you were one. Where were you born?

Josef Brown: I was born in Baltimore. My father was born in Bladensburg.

Suzanne: Why did they decide to move to Bladensburg?

Josef Brown: My grandfather got ill, and they needed someone to run the store. So, my father moved back.

Suzanne: Did your father have any stories?

Josef Brown: He went to Hyattsville High School and he went to the school that was where the library is in Bladensburg. It was another building when he went there. As I recall, he said he remembered ice skating all the way down to the Anacostia River on the Eastern Branch. He said he remembered when he was young that good sized boats were still coming up the Anacostia. He always blamed the river on the sand and gravel that caused it to fill up. That was always his feelings. A lot of it, I think, has to do with the development.

Suzanne: Why did you decide to move out of Bladensburg?

Josef Brown: I thought the schools in this area were better, the junior high and the high school. From this area, most of the kids here were going on to college. In the Bladensburg area, the majority were not.

Suzanne: What was high school like for you?

Josef Brown: The high school was smaller than it is today, but it is a different school. It was much smaller than it was when they tore it down to build a new school. One of the things I do remember when they built the new high school was they built three schools at the same time, Northwestern, Bladensburg, and Suitland. They had names for the three schools. One was A.S. Cooke. One was Eugene Burroughs. I can't remember the third

one. I think they were names of superintendents of schools. There was a huge outcry that they didn't want to have those names. They named it Northwestern, which was a combination of Mt. Rainer, Hyattsville, and Greenbelt high schools. Bladensburg was Bladensburg and Suitland, which combined a lot of the schools in that area. There was a dual system in those days. There were White schools and Black schools. They were totally separate. I remember I never understood where the Black kids went. I lived across from the George Washington House. Most of my friends were Black. It never occurred to me where they went at school time. I think they went to school in Bladensburg. I know from later years, that there was a Black elementary school. I think 15 years ago a school media center. That was a Black elementary school. I remember looking back at segregation; the kids weren't in school with me even though they were friends.

Suzanne: Do remember the whole busing issue?

Josef Brown: I do remember that, because my law office was the attorneys. My partner was the attorney for the Board of Education, starting '58 or '59. After Brown vs. the Board of Education, he kept telling the Board of Education of the County that they could not do what they wanted to do and run separate school systems. Prince George's County was at that time controlled by only White people. The Board of Education was pretty conservative with the members of the board. There was one Black member on the Board, Oswald Brooks. Every time it was proposed to change it, the board would not approve anything. My partner kept telling them they would get in trouble, because you can't do it. The NAACP filed suit against the Board of Education. Although my partner put up a good fight, it was a losing cause from the beginning, because the schools were defacto segregated. This brought in busing. It continued much too long, because the reason for the busing had disappeared. They were now transporting Black students to predominantly Black schools. It became difficult, because the demographics of the county changed. The neighborhoods that had been bused from became majority Black. They were busing Black kids to majority Black schools.

Suzanne: What community activities did you participate in?

Josef Brown: There was Cub Scouts, Boys Club, as an adult Lions Club. I was Town Councilman. I was a Director of the Fire Department. I was an honorary member of the fire department. I was never a fireman. Park and Planning ran summer programs. In those days, as a kid, things weren't as organized as they are now. Today, they have a league and a schedule. In those days, you would just go up to the park and play ball and people would show up. It was a good time. You didn't have to have uniforms or umpires or referrers. You just went and played.

Suzanne: What was your favorite spot in the community?

Josef Brown: When I lived across from the George Washington House, probably my favorite place to play was the barn. There was no particular place. We would just hang out at, either my house or friend's house. We also had a big yard, and we would play ball in our yard.

Suzanne: What is your favorite landmark or historic site or landmark in Bladensburg?

Josef Brown: Either Bostwick or the George Washington House.

Suzanne: If you were giving directions, what were people's landmarks?

Josef Brown: The Peace Cross. My wife said, when she first heard where I lived, that the only thing she knew about in Bladensburg was the Peace Cross on the way to the beach.

Suzanne: How do you feel about the term Port Towns? Is it effective tool in drawing attention to history?

Josef Brown: I think it is, but I don't know which towns are included.

Suzanne: Bladensburg, Cottage City, Colmar Manor, and Edmonston.

Josef Brown: I see the flags that say Port Towns, and because I'm from Bladensburg it has some significance. I don't know if the people from Bladensburg say, "Where is that?" I look at it differently than people who have never been there. Most people, I think, think of Bladensburg having all these directional signs that say Bladensburg 75. You would think it was this great metropolis.

Suzanne: How do children fit into the story of Bladensburg? Did you have children when you were in Bladensburg?

Josef Brown: Yes. We moved from Bladensburg when our oldest daughter was entering junior high. They went to Bladensburg Elementary.

Suzanne: Did they like the community?

Josef Brown: They had friends. Kids like it wherever you put them. As long as they're safe, they're happy.

Suzanne: I know you said Hyattsville had better schools, but was it a good community to foster a child?

Josef Brown: I think to a certain age, it was. Once you have the children who are going to go to college and their friends who are immediately going to go to work, I think there is a split there. For that reason, I think Bladensburg was not a good community, if your kids were going to go to college.

Suzanne: What were the major political issues in the past or today?

Josef Brown: Flood control was a major issue. There is one that struck home with me and my family. There was at one time an idea to combine a number of the towns. I know

that was opposed, because Bladensburg would lose its identity. Then, the one that was close to home with me was the Hyattsville Post Office. It had a very active Postmaster, who gobbled up everything, as far as being part of Hyattsville. That's why there are so many zip codes that were originally Hyattsville something. Landover was a Hyattsville Post Office. Cheverly was a Hyattsville Post Office. He tried to grab Bladensburg. My father was Postmaster of Bladensburg. The community fought it through our congressman.

Suzanne: There was an identity issue?

Josef Brown: Yes. Very much so. There was tremendous community pride and identification.

Suzanne: Is there more crime in Bladensburg than there once was?

Josef Brown: Yes. I remember the entire time I lived in Bladensburg there was one murder. I think that was between two friends who were drunk and one stabbed the other. I don't ever remember any armed murders. There were a lot of petty crimes in those days, no serious crimes. You didn't have drugs in those days. The closest thing to it was alcohol. There seemed to be a high incidence of alcoholism. There didn't seem to be serious crimes like drugs. Growing up, if you heard shots, it was someone hunting.

Suzanne: Was there racism in Bladensburg?

Josef Brown: There definitely was. A good example that I can give you is: As a kid I delivered the Washington Post, the Daily News, the Washington Star, and the Washington Times Herald. I delivered all those for one reason. They couldn't get anybody to deliver them, because everything behind our house was the Black neighborhood. I didn't have any problem with the people, because they were all my friends. They all knew me since I was born. I didn't have any problem with it. Of course, I used it economically. I would threaten to quit. The distributor knew he couldn't get anybody else. He'd increase my wage. The schools were segregated. In the shopping center that backs up to Bostwick, there was a People's Drugstore there and the Black people could not sit at the counter. Also, at the Cheverly Theatre, they couldn't go to the movies. There was definitely segregation and discrimination.

Suzanne: Did busing change anything?

Josef Brown: It caused White flight.

Suzanne: What economic changes have occurred over the past 10 to 20 years?

Josef Brown: Bladensburg was never a high income area. I don't think it's a high income area today. I think there are a lot more businesses there today than there were and more industry. But then again, there are more people. I would never say it was a central economic engine. It was mostly neighborhood businesses. A couple of them are still there

from when I was a kid. I think, McCloud and Romberg are still there. I think that is it, now that I think about it. The area east of the railroad tracks was the swamp where I would ice skate. It was marshland.

Suzanne: Do you think the community dynamic has changed.

Josef Brown: Yes. I think it has changed a lot in the makeup of the demographics of the people. When I was a kid, we never had a Latino. Now, I see lots of Latino stores, which tells me there is a large Latino community. I think the percentage of African American population is much larger than when I was there. I never knew a Latino in the town. We had a high school teacher, Senora Carrill. She lived in Sunnybrook. She was the only Latino I knew in the town.

Suzanne: What did she teach?

Josef Brown: Spanish. She was from Puerto Rico. I think she was the only Latino in the town.

Suzanne: Do you think history can contribute to revitalization?

Josef Brown: Yes. I definitely feel that way. I've seen it in so many different areas.

Suzanne: Ten years ago the concept of the Port Towns was created. Has anything changed, that you have seen, since the creation of the concept?

Josef Brown: I don't know what has been done by the M-NCPPC or what's been done by the CDC. I don't know who's done what. I see a lot of things happening in town, but I don't know who to credit it to. I know the port area is Park and Planning. The area along Alternate 1, I think that's Park and Planning. One of the things that I find depressing about the town is empty stores and some of the businesses that are in some of the stores. That's not just because it's Bladensburg, but all over. Not just in the county, it's all over the country.

Suzanne: They're reusing the George Washington House. The Anacostia Watershed Society is using the building.

Josef Brown: I like to see them use these historic properties, if for no other reason than to sustain them. Because one of the things that bothers me the most about Bladensburg is all of the historic properties that are no longer there.

Suzanne: Do you know about the Anacostia Trails Heritage Area? It is a tourism organization that is bringing together the history and creating a Route 1 Corridor.

Josef Brown: Yes. I remember looking at a flier that I got at the College Park Airport Museum. I try and get my grandkids over there as often as possible, because I like it and hopefully they will.

Suzanne: What are your satisfactions or dissatisfactions with Bladensburg?

Josef Brown: I expressed some of my dissatisfactions, the empty stores and some of the businesses that are in the stores. My satisfaction is that some members of the community are trying to preserve Bladensburg and preserve the history of the place. That is good to see, because if you don't do that the town would really go down hill. A plus that it has over many, many other towns in the county is its age in the history. Hyattsville is like a new born child compared to Bladensburg.

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

Josef Brown: It is the oldest. That would make it unique. It has the most historic buildings. It has the most history connected with it. I'm not sure what Colmar Manor has other than the Dueling Grounds. Edmonston, I'm not sure what history it has historically. Cottage City, I don't know what it has historically. I think historically, it is way above the others. Plus, it's older. It has a certain charm to it.

Suzanne: What could you see happen in the future?

Josef Brown: In a perfect world, there would be lots of money to restore all of the old buildings and make it a draw for people to come to see them. This would then make the town a draw. This would then upgrade the town. I would love to see that.