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Summary:
William Colburn explains his early interest in the architectural history and preservation of Detroit and his involvement with Preservation Wayne, a student organization founded in 1975 by Allen Wallace and Marilyn Florek to preserve Wayne State University's historically valuable buildings in and around campus. Colburn joined Preservation Wayne in 1976, becoming Co-chairman with Allen Wallace in 1977, Chairman by 1979, and was the group's founding Executive Director from 1981 to 1995. Under William Colburn's leadership, Preservation Wayne transitioned from its origins as a WSU student organization to become Detroit's first professional, city wide, non-profit historic preservation organization. He recounts the battle to save the David Mackenzie House, home of the founder of Wayne State University, and the houses along East Ferry Street. Preservation Wayne continues to exist today as Preservation Detroit.

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William Colburn oral history interview, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

Note:
As of 2015, William Colburn is the Director of the historic Freer House, Merrill-Palmer Skillman Institute, Wayne State University. Danae Dracht is a graduate student at Wayne State University in the MLIS program. The interview was conducted as a part of a graduate course, Oral History: Methodology and Research, and is to be added to the Cass Corridor Evolution 2015 Oral History Project at the Walter P. Reuther Library.

Subject:
William Colburn.
Marilyn Florek.
Allen Wallace.
Beulah Groehn Croxford.

Louis Cook.
Mildred Jeffries.
George Gullen.
David Mackenzie House.
Linsell House.
Charles Lang Freer House.
East Ferry Street.
Robson-Dodge House.
Butler House.
Hecker House.
Inn on Ferry Street.
Preservation Wayne.
Preservation Detroit.
Wayne State University.
Wayne State University Board of Governors.
The South End.
Cass Corridor.
Detroit Urban Conservation Project.
Midtown, Incorporated.
University Cultural Center Association.
Section 106 Review.
National Register of Historic Places.
Architectural history.
Program development.
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Cass Corridor Evolution 2015 Oral History Project.

An Oral History Interview with William Colburn

WC: William Colburn
DD: Danae Dracht

DD: Okay, so we're in the Mackenzie House. This is December 3rd, 2015. I'm Danae Dracht and I'm here with William Colburn. A little bit of background about William: he has a background in architectural history, program development, urban planning and affairs, and neighborhood conservation. He has been recognized as a leader in historic preservation in Detroit and on state and national levels. So, it's good to have you here [laughs]. I'm just going to start off by asking you a little bit about your background. Can you tell me about your parents, where you grew up, and what your childhood was like?

WC: Yeah, well thank you for arranging this interview. I'm pleased to respond to your questions as best as I can. My parents were Marjorie and Scott Colburn. My father was born in Ypsilanti and my mother in [Detroit], so they were both from the area. I have three siblings and we grew up in northwest Detroit. So, I lived first on Mettetal Street and then really grew up on Rutland Street [Avenue] in the Grandmont neighborhood. Ah, I attended Detroit Public Schools except for my senior year; I was at Cooley High School. My parents moved to Farmington when I was a senior, so I spent my senior year at Farmington High School but quickly moved back to Detroit when I was nineteen. Actually, my first apartment was a little one-room in a house on East Ferry Street where ironically I'm back on East Ferry Street as the Director of the Freer House; it's about a block away from where I started out at nineteen years old. But I worked and traveled for about the first three years out of high school and did various jobs and then decided to start at Wayne State University. And the project that I was working on—I was always employed while I was going through Wayne State—the first major project that I worked on that had anything to do with historic preservation was the Detroit Urban Conservation Project. The project was developed in 1976 as a historic building survey of the City of Detroit and Wayne State's Urban Studies Center was the entity that conducted the survey and there were three clients—two clients—the City of Detroit and the State of Michigan. Um—

DD: So this was all while you were a student at Wayne State?

WC: Yes, it was in 1976, and I had started at Wayne as a student, working on the Detroit Urban Conservation Project, which was about a one to two year project. The goal of that project was to create a survey of all the historic buildings in the city, of all the buildings in the city, actually, every building within the boulevard ring [West and East Grand Boulevard] was photographed individually and information was compiled to create an index card on every single structure and then outside the boulevard ring every block was photographed and any significant buildings on those blocks were pulled out and identified. The intention for that project was that it would serve as a planning tool to influence—to help influence historic preservation of significant structures whenever something was proposed: a clearance project, a new freeway, anything of that sort.

There were a number of younger people who were employed by that project, myself included, to do photography, to do research on buildings, to compile the information into these index cards. Which, you have to imagine, there were no computers so this was like cutting out contact photos and pasting them on index cards and handwriting the information on index cards. But interestingly, I think what it did was spark amongst all those who were employed, which would basically be people in their twenties, a real interest in the city and its architecture—very pivotal at the time. So I learned about Preservation Wayne being formed, I heard about it. It was started in 1975; I worked on campus in 1976. I decided to attend one of the meetings…

DD: Oh, so right at the same time.

WC: …and got involved through that. Yeah.

DD: Okay, so that's probably what led to your interest and your involvement. It was a new organization being established about the same time you were a student. Um, yeah—

WC: Exactly. And it involved a project whose intention was to spark greater historic preservation in the city. In terms of childhood interest, which was one of your questions here…

DD: Yeah, yeah.

WC: I think growing up in Detroit I was very fortunate to grow up in a wonderful neighborhood. Although while unfortunately it was not racially diverse, it was very close to—I mean if you lived in Detroit there was a lot of interaction between African American and White communities regardless—but it was a very diverse neighborhood in terms of economic levels, of age, of family size, of religion. And I was lucky to grow up on a street where every house was different. There were no two houses alike on the street, so I loved sort of walking to school and just looking at the buildings and the architecture and sort of trying to piece together what were the influences of these houses that housed my neighbors and friends. So, Rutland Street was a great street to grow up on and it was at a time when there was less concern about safety and so my friends and I were free to take a bus, the Grand River bus, downtown when we were eleven years old and could walk downtown or go to Hudson's or go to the Library or come to the art museum unaccompanied.

So, we used to see a lot as a family and when the riots took place in 1967—I mean we were already starting to see some families moving to the suburbs from our neighborhood—after 1967 of course that accelerated. And I think it was a sense of what an incredible city we have, what incredible infrastructure we have, even recognizing that as a child, and what a wonderful neighborhood and neighborhood relations we have because of the density and the diversity and the proximity of residents to retail, for example. And yet people were trading this off to move to the suburbs to houses and subdivisions that had no real interest and no real quality of architecture, where the shopping was two miles from houses. And just not understanding why people were so

willing to make this trade off and let go of this incredible city and this incredible history through white flight. And wanting, for some odd reason, to try and do something about that but not knowing how to do that as a kid.

So I think that sparked my interest in wanting to stay in the city and recommit to the city. And I think that was a very similar situation for the other people who were involved in forming Preservation Wayne, people like Allen Wallace and Marilyn Florek who started the group at least a year before I got involved, they shared interest in maybe anti-suburbanization [laughs] and seeing that the city was really at risk and not wanting to see this lost for their generation, for our generation, for future generations. And they similarly had ties to the city or had grown up in the city and their parents had moved from where their grandparents had lived here.

So, there was a real sense of urgency and concern about how Detroit would redevelop itself, what would be lost, whether Detroit was going to recreate itself in the image of the suburbs, which was where it was headed, and wanting to do something about it. And it was also during a period when student activism was perhaps more prevalent than it has been in recent years. And there was kind of an energy in the air about that. It was also a precarious time in Detroit because Detroit, even up to through 70's was still—into the 80's and even into 90's was still—very much wedded to the idea that newer is better, wholesale clearance is more cost effective and more conducive to revitalizing an area than dealing with a bunch of old buildings. So Detroit was kind of hanging onto an outmoded model of revitalization that other cities had already started to question and were giving up. And this area in particular around Wayne State, the Cultural Center and the Medical Center was really very much at risk for total demolition of all the historical buildings save for maybe a handful like the DIA and the Library and Old Main. Also, I think the students—

DD: Yeah—

WC: I can see you wanted to ask me more about what created Preservation Wayne itself?

DD: Yeah, can you tell me more about the origins? Do you know, like, what led the students to start it in the—I mean, you referred to that a little bit, but could you kind of expound on that more?

WC: [Laughs] Okay, sure. Well, you know, probably the best person to ask is Marilyn, who, of the two, is the survivor, she and Allen having come out with the idea of the organization. Um, but I can answer it as best as I can. I think just from knowing what was going on at the time, I think the group's formation was—came out of the students' concerns themselves about not wanting to see Detroit's historic buildings lost, but was also being influenced by what else was going on in the city in terms of preservation and was very much influenced and mentored by a woman named Beulah Groehn, later became Beulah Groehn Croxford. Her first husband passed away, her second was Mr. Croxford. Beulah and her husband, Mr. Groehn, moved to—were pioneers with West Canfield [Street] historic preservation. They moved from Franklin, a suburb of Detroit, to

West Canfield Street in 1962, if I'm remembering the year properly, when Canfield Street was basically drug dens, abandoned houses, or prostitution. There were no other stable residents living on the street. So they bought the house, I wish I had the address [627 West Canfield], but it's the house that's directly across Second Avenue from the Traffic Jam, on the corner…

DD: Oh yep, mmhmm.

WC: …that beautiful red brick house, and started restoring it and then encouraging other people to move onto that street. So, really I think although, you know, for a street that had gone completely down hill that needed to come back, that was probably the first example in Detroit of an urban pioneering effort to turn around a street, which was of course one block.

DD: Yeah, but—

WC: But just that alone took many, many years to accomplish. But Beulah was not satisfied with just trying to preserve that street. She wanted to become—she wanted Detroit to become a leader in historic preservation. So she took a major role. I think the group she first formed was called the Detroit Historic Preservation Society and she kind of found a sympathetic ear at the Detroit Historical Museum. Jim Conway was on staff there at the time and was particularly supportive of her interests and meetings were held and the Historical Museum kind of became a place for people to organize. And the only tool that was really available at that time to try and have any impact on, or—how can I say—to have any legal authority on trying to preserve a building was the National Register of Historic Places. The National Preservation Act was only passed in the 1960's, providing a tool for people to try to get a building historically registered and therefore some level of protection or at least identification.

DD: Yeah.

WC: So that was the only tool available. The State of Michigan Historic Register was established, but even up 'til today it has no powers. It cannot stop a building being torn down, it is basically an honorary designation which allows you to put up a plaque on the building that has some value in itself, but doesn't have any teeth. The federal legislation at least would require a review by federal bodies if federal money was being used in the demolition of that building. And at the time there was so much federal money coming in for freeway development, for the Model City neighborhood urban renewal program, a lot of projects that were threatening historic buildings did have federal funding coming in, so it was a tool and Beulah's idea was, "let's get as many buildings that are historic onto the National Register as possible." So her idea was, "let's like grab people off the street and train them how to fill out a National Register nomination form and then submit those to the State and then hopefully the State would approve them and they would go on to the federal government and then the Department of the Interior would approve them and

we'd suddenly start getting a lot of buildings in Detroit listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

So Marilyn and Allen somehow met Beulah and started taking training sessions on how to fill out National Register forms and she said, "Wayne State is our major issue." Because Canfield is not very far from Wayne State campus, it's only a few blocks away. At that time, there was a lot of—Wayne's main expansion efforts were south of main campus, so from Warren all the way down to Cass Park, Wayne State really viewed as being future campus expansion. And so the students' first project really was to survey the neighborhood and try and identify not only buildings on the Wayne State campus, but in the immediate surrounding areas, identify buildings that were historic and start to either process them for National Register nomination forms or start an awareness campaign that these are important buildings, not just a slum or ghetto ready to be torn down. So I really think that Preservation Wayne came about not from focusing on any specific small building, but from a very broad vision…

DD: Yeah.

WC: …a desire is to see preservation fostered throughout the city of Detroit, but deciding to focus on this one area and then Beulah Groehn saying, "You are students at Wayne State, Wayne State is one of the biggest issues that is threatening historic buildings in the area both on campus and in the surrounding community. Why don't you focus on Wayne State and see what you can do."

DD: Mmhm. And that's what you were saying earlier, a common misconception is that Preservation Wayne was founded to fight the destruction of the Mackenzie House. But that is not the case at all. It has a more of a broader scope.

WC: Right.

DD: And—but the battle for the Mackenzie House was very important in Preservation Wayne's history. Um—

[Noise in the background]

WC: Should we—do you want to stop it for a second?

DD: Yeah.

[Recording stops, starts]

DD: So, can you tell me more about the origins of Preservation—I mean, I'm sorry, the Mackenzie House and how—the battle for the Mackenzie House—and how that all went down from—it was a long process, right?

WC: Yes. Well, we should step back from that just to establish that Preservation Wayne was formed as a student organization, an official student organization at Wayne State University and was registered with student government. It had a faculty advisor, Nola Tutag, and applied for budget funding in 1975. So, really I think the first year to year and a half of the organization's start was focused on surveying the campus to identify historic buildings in the immediate communities, especially that south of the campus into the Cass Corridor. The first—I think the group decided to focus on a particular building that was threatened with demolition around 1976, and that house was not the Mackenzie House, you understand me, it was a house called the Parshall House, P-A-R-S-H-A-L-L.

DD: Okay, so the Mackenzie House was not the first one.

WC: Not the first, right. And really, there wasn't—it wasn't formed to focused on a specific building, it really was formed with this broader vision of "let's try and produce an urban planning approach that incorporates historic buildings on the campus and in the community." Then of course, it comes down to a building being threatened and having to take that philosophy to a specific case situation. And that first one that came up was: the Detroit Historical Museum was tearing down a historic house that it owned, an 1890's house called the Parshall House that was on Kirby and Cass. And the students engaged, I mean we went right to the top and tried to appeal to the Detroit Historical Commission that runs the Historical Museum. We tried to appeal to the director whose name was Solon Weeks at the time. The chair of the Detroit Historical Commission at the time was a gentleman by the name of Charles Hagler who was the Vice President of Urban Affairs at General Motors and Preservation Wayne—side note: the group's original name was Wayne State University Historic Preservation Association with the heavy acronym of WSUHPA. [Laughs] And fortunately, Allen, who had a very good mind for public relations and branding, changed the name to Preservation Wayne within about a year I think.

So, the group focused on that house and really, as I said, went to the top and wrote letters to the Mayor, Coleman Young. [The students] tried to appear before the Detroit Historical Commission to appeal for saving that building. Uh, they lost that battle. The idea at that time was that the museum wanted to tear down that house and the one next it, the Joy House, which is still standing today, to allow for a new addition to the Detroit Historical Museum, which has, of course, never been built. So that's now a vacant lot today. Um, but I think that the students learned a lot going through that exercise and shortly thereafter the Mackenzie House was surveyed.

And the Mackenzie House was at 4735 Cass between Hancock and Forest. It was threatened by—it was the last building to be torn down for a Department of Housing and Urban Development sponsored college housing program. It was a student apartment building that was being built on Forest. So all of the buildings, including an historic church that was on Forest, from Second to Forest to Cass on the south side of the block had all been torn down or were being torn down. The Mackenzie House was the last one to go. And construction was scheduled for this site for a student apartment building, which only lasted twenty-five or thirty years, it has since been torn down because it had

been so poorly constructed. So the Mackenzie House was the last to go and the rationale for it being town down was that a sewer line needed to come through this site to service the new student apartment building. Forest Apartments was the name of the building, otherwise known as "Teflon Towers" because it looked so cheap.

DD: Yeah, that's terrible. Twenty-five years?

WC: So the building [the Mackenzie House] was significantly deteriorated. It was still owned by—it was owned by Wayne State University, but Wayne State wasn't using it actively and hadn't used it actively for a number of years. They were allowing an entity called the Campus Treasure Shop, which was an architectural salvage operation that was run by Marguerite Hague, who was a Wayne State alumna and her husband was very active with the university and she ran this architectural salvage operation to raise money for campus beautification. She was in her heart a real preservationist and she helped play a role in saving the building. But the building was filled with bathtubs, sinks, stained glass windows, radiators, things that had been saved—that she had saved from houses that were being torn down in order to encourage people who were restoring houses to repurpose those items. And, oh gosh, the Mackenzie House story is so involved that I'm afraid that it's going to difficult to illustrate it properly in this interview [laughs]. So feel free to jump in any time you want to direct me.

DD: Okay. Okay, yeah, but it was a success and it was toward the beginning of the Preservation Wayne establishment. It was in the front end. And can you tell me about the fundraising project that went into the Mackenzie House? Wasn't there a massive fundraiser to—to preserve, or to—

WC: Well, to be honest I don't think that any of us involved in Preservation Wayne at that time, and I got involved by about 1976-77, had any idea that we would be the ones ending up having to not only fight for the preservation of the building, but then raise the money for it, to find the architect who would donate services to do the planning for it, to identify the tenants that would come into the building to then oversee the restoration. I think, you know, from perhaps a naïve perspective, it was the students' idea to go before the University and make a case that this building needed to be preserved and somehow convince them and then they would step forward and do what was right.

DD: Yeah, that's not the case, though.

WC: It's not the case at all. What happened was a very, very intense year of really a battle of the student organization, which was attracting community members as well, but was still registered as a student organization at Wayne State. And appealing—having to go all the way up the chain of command at Wayne State University to the Board of Governors and to the President [George Gullen]. Wayne State had already signed a contract for demolition of the building and they were preparing to vacate the building, it would be torn down at any moment.

DD: But you did talk to the President about—?

WC: Well, yes, the first conversations were held I think with the chain of command, the President's assistant, and I don't think we were ever able to meet directly with the President at that time, but his assistant, Mr. Ben Jordan, was assigned to meet with us so we knew that he was communicating with the President. The President took a very firm stand that the Mackenzie House would be demolished.

And I think that they understood, as did the group, the symbolic value of this building. I mean Preservation Wayne focused on this building in part because it was the home of Wayne State University. I mean David Mackenzie is the most important person in the creation of Wayne State. Frank Cody would be a second person who was very instrumental, but really Mackenzie had the heart and soul of the university in mind […]. I mean, he was principal of Central High School, he even founded the junior college and became dean of the four-year liberal arts college which is the basis for which the medical school and the nursing school and all the independent schools gathered around to create essentially what eventually became Wayne State University campus by the 1950's.

So this house had a very strong historical relationship with origins of the University itself and the students' feeling was that if Wayne State didn't respect its own history, how would it ever respect the history of the community around it? By the same token the University felt at that time and going into the 80's and even through to the early 90's all the older buildings were scheduled—that Wayne State owned—were scheduled for demolition and replacement.

DD: All of them?

WC: All of them. I mean it was even envisioned that the Hilberry would be gone and a new theater would be built. I mean all the old houses that once held classes or administration would be demolished for new classroom buildings. Even Old Main, there was discussion that just a section on Cass would be kept and that newer additions in the back would all be demolished. The newer additions were still historic. And so all those—I think it was called the Condition Three category—that every older building that Wayne State had repurposed and renovated for use would be torn down. Um, so I think the University felt that if they gave in on this house and allowed the Mackenzie House to be saved that it was going to create a precedent…

DD: For other places.

WC: …that cases would be made by the community and by students that other historic houses on campus should be saved and they didn't want that to happen. And the planning, the Director of Planning at that time for Wayne State was a gentleman by the name of David Layne and he was firmly opposed to the Mackenzie House being saved. So you had—this was what the group was facing: the President, George Gullen, was firmly opposed to saving the house, the Director of Planning was firmly opposed to saving the house, the Board of Governors already had approved demolition of the house

and allocated the money for its demolition and unfortunately, as is common in Detroit, a last minute effort to try to save the building.

So the group was up against enormous odds and, you know, I think at first did things that student groups do like petition signing. I think I remember us going out and gathering like 3,000 signatures on petitions and thought that this was just incredible and showed it to one of the Board of Governors' members and she said, "Anyone can get people to sign petitions. That's not going to work. Here's how you do it." And we started to get information on how to lobby the Board of Governors. They're all elected officials and had to start answering the points the university put forth for why the Mackenzie House had to be torn down.

DD: And how many people were involved at this time?

WC: Um, I think there were about—well, there was probably a core group, you know, those who thought they were, felt like we were working at this full time as well as working our jobs and going to school—probably fifteen of us.

DD: Okay.

WC: And there may have been a larger circle, you know, concentric circle, of support of another fifteen or thirty community members like Beulah Croxford, whom I mentioned earlier, and others who started to rally around this effort.

But, we realized right away that we had to be politically astute. We had to be prepared to deal with the questions about money to restore the building, we had to be prepared with how the building would be used and had to find tenants for it, we had to be prepared to answer concerns about it not being structurally sound or worth saving. So we had to address all of those issues and we went before the Board of Governors of the University and asked for the opportunity to present our position and presented information to address each of those items. And the Board of Governors—and then the *Detroit Free Press*, an editor of the *Detroit Free Press* [Louis Cook], started to pick up on this story and he was attending those meetings with the Board of Governors and we got the support of Charles Hagler who was the President of the Detroit Historical Commission that had recently torn down a building and he saw an opportunity to improve the public face of the Museum by telling Wayne State they should save their building.

And so the first presentation to the Board of Governors—I remember Allen presented, I presented at certain points, but I remember that either Allen or I, it was probably Allen, said, "We're Preservation Wayne and joining us in the audience is Charles Hagler, Vice President of Urban Affairs for General Motors […], Dolores Slowinski with the Michigan Council for the Arts…" And we kind of had assembled five or six pretty significant community people and they [the Board of Governors] were not expecting that. They were expecting a group of students who would come and make the case and everyone would say, "Very nice," and be very patronizing and say, "how sweet of you, wanting to save this building, but you know kids, it's just not going to happen. You just

don't understand what's going on." And we had some really solid information that the building was historically significant, that it was salvageable, that there would be tenants that would be interested in coming into the building if the University wasn't using it, and that it was possible to find funding. And, especially that the sewer line could be relocated because we went down and met with the City of Detroit because Wayne State's position was, "it's not us saying the sewer line has to come through here, it's the City of Detroit saying the sewer line has to come through here." So we said, "Okay, let's meet with the City of Detroit."

DD: Wow.

WC: We happened to meet with a very sympathetic city planner named Candyce Sweeda who said, "I kind of like that house, and we could relocate that sewer line around it, it doesn't have to go through the house." So we went back to the Board of Governors saying—and that's in one of the *South End* articles—[…] the sewer could be rerouted just south of the building, it didn't have to go through the building, which was the rationale for that [demolition]. That started to dismantle all of the University's arguments when we said, "The City of Detroit said the sewer line doesn't have to go through the house."

DD: Yeah.

WC: So we did several presentations before the Board of Governors, collected more information, you mentioned—asked about fundraising—one of the things, great finds, we, in doing research and going through the university archives found that David Mackenzie's sister [Janet Mackenzie] had left money to the University to be used, "in a building in her brother's honor."

DD: You found this?

WC: We found this. This money had been left in the 1920's and there was still about 60,000 dollars in this fund, which of course, this is the 70's, so 60,000 dollars would be much more today.

DD: Yeah.

WC: And we said, "Hey, Wayne State, you actually have money left by David Mackenzie's sister to be used in a building in her brother's honor. What better use of that money than to have it go towards helping to preserve the Mackenzie House?" So, we just kept chipping away at that and coming back to the Board of Governors. We had different presentations on providing more support for saving the building, so the Board of Governors started to—and *The South End* was covering it very actively and in one article they wrote, "Board of Governors Mislead by Administration." And the Board was aware that somebody from the *Detroit Free Press*, an editor of the *Detroit Free Press*, was sitting in the audience, listening to these presentations and writing about it. And they're getting—because we—nobody ever thinks to lobby the Board of Governors at Wayne State. They're all elected officials. So we started sending out notices to people saying,

"Call the Board of Governors at Wayne State. Here's what you say, 'I want to see the David Mackenzie House saved. It's very important for Detroit and Wayne State's history…'" They never get calls or letters from the public at all. Suddenly they're starting to get calls, they're starting to get letters, things are going on, suddenly their meetings, which hardly anybody would ever attend, unless you went to Wayne State […]

DD: Mmhm. [Now the issue is] being backed by the public.

WC: Well, and being promoted, you know, in the newspaper.

DD: Yeah.

WC: So they started questioning the university administration. What happened is the Board of Governors—I don't think this had ever, it certainly had never occurred in that president's administration—voted against the President. The President had a recommendation that the Mackenzie House should be demolished immediately. The Board of Governors said, "No." As a result, the Director of Planning resigned because he was upset that his position wasn't being backed. And you know the Board of the University is kind of like a parliamentary system. If you vote against a presidential recommendation, it's almost like a vote of no confidence in the president and the administration. So there was some real—it was a huge issue.

DD: It was very political and tense.

WC: Yeah, it was very tense and we felt it. And we were under a lot of pressure and we really were wondering if we were going to make it. But there was such an incredible passion and commitment in getting this to work. And one of the things that was interesting was, this was a federal project, building the college housing that was going to be—that was affecting the Mackenzie House—there is a provision within the National Register of Historic Places, it's called—506—I'm afraid I'm going to miss it. Do you know it? Is it the 506 Review Process? I can find it here to make sure I am referring to it properly but, yeah, it's the section 106 Federal Review Process. And the battle for the Mackenzie House sparked the first ever—Section 106 Federal Review Process of a historic building [in Detroit]. In other words, there was federal money involved in the project to tear this building down.

It was already submitted for consideration for listing on the National Register. Because there was federal money involved, the agency that's funding the demolition has to stop and do a review to find out if their project is adversely affecting an historic building that is eligible for a the National Register for Historic Places. This had never happened in Detroit before and it was in the Department of Housing and Urban Development. So what really freaked the University out was that Saul Green, who was the attorney for the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Detroit, actually sent a letter to Wayne State saying, "We understand that one of our projects to build student housing, the Forest Apartments, may be adversely affecting an historic building on that site, the David Mackenzie House, we ask you to withhold demolition until we have an

opportunity to review this project." And Wayne State had never had a federal agency tell them stop a project.

DD: Ah, yeah.

WC: So that was another piece of the puzzle. Um—

DD: And this is all mostly student led at this time?

WC: Basically, yes.

DD: Yeah, a group of fifteen or more, just lobbying together and pulling members of the community and government to stop this. That's…amazing.

WC: Yeah, and we also had to hit on all cylinders. We had to hit on public relations, community support, legal issues, federal government issues, um, funding issues, adaptive reuse issues, we had to answer/deal with all of it. So, basically what happened then was that the University stopped the demolition [because of] the Board of Governors' [decision], and then said, "Okay, we won't tear the building down, but we're not going to restore it, either. So you basically have a year to figure out what you're going to do, students." [Laughs] So the idea was that, "Well, of course they're going to fail." You know, a group of students whose main fund raising up to that point was bake sales. I think that's where we got most of our money, our student government money, you know, was only an 800 dollar-a-year budget. We started doing memberships and that raised a little money. We had no experience in fundraising.

And so suddenly we had a year's reprieve to figure out what had to be done and if we didn't make any progress in a year—so within that year, that's when we identified 60,000 dollars and I hope I have the right amount, that was left by David Mackenzie's sister that was still in the university's funding. Um, we were able to get—at that time the federal government granted funds for historic buildings, historic preservation […]. We were able to get a 60,000-dollar grant through the Michigan Bureau of History, from the federal Department of the Interior, towards the building. So suddenly we had 125,000 [correct amount was 120,000] identified. And then we started a corporate campaign. We got the President of Michigan Consolidated Gas Company, which is now DTE Energy, to agree to head up a corporate campaign. About, I think about 40,000 dollars came in through that corporate campaign.

DD: Wow.

WC: So, suddenly we had to switch to becoming like grant writers with no understanding of how to do that, or any background on fundraising.

DD: Yeah, all learning on the job.

WC: And we also started to do fundraisers in the [Mackenzie] House. I think the first fundraiser we did was a benefit in connection with Hilberry Theater. We did a theater event, a Moliere play and then had the actors come over in costume in the House, which was unrestored, and did benefit events. We—the architect that helped develop the preservation plan for the building, who was Lewis Dickens, donated his services, we got donated services in as well, and he created a poster of the house and signed them. We had limited editions of the posters, we sold those. We created a campaign, a "Restore a Square Foot Campaign" for the House, where you could get a certificate for restoring a square foot of the House, which was like twelve dollars and fifty cents to restore [a square foot of] the House. So with all that stuff combined, within about a year and a half, we'd managed to nail down or identify about 200-225,000 dollars. And um, the next issue was, the university said, "Okay, great, you've got money, but we as the University own the building and we have no intention of putting any university use into that building at all." So we said, "Okay."

DD: They're just not working with you at all, are they?

WC: [Laughs] So the answer to that was, "Okay, you're telling us that we should go out to find tenants for the building." Essentially, that's what we decided [to do]. And at that time, the University Cultural Center Association had just been formed [circa 1978], that is today's Midtown, Incorporated, the powerhouse organization that is responsible for so much of the revitalization over the past twenty years in the whole midtown area. They had one director there in the basement over at CCS [College for Creative Studies], next to the metal shop. A windowless room, she had her office. So I went to her, Mary Hubbel, who was the first director, and said, "If we could get the Mackenzie House restored, and if Wayne State agreed, would you become the main tenant of the building?" And she said—she took it to their board and they agreed. So suddenly the University Cultural Center Association, whose board was made up of the Director of the DIA, the Director of the Detroit Public Library, the Director of the Detroit Science Center, the Director of the Engineering Society, said yeah, we will be paying tenants of that house if it's restored. So we went back to the University and said, "We have a tenant, and they're ready to pay, and they're all of your colleagues. You don't want to say no to them, right?"

And then, somehow we negotiated to get the second floor for Preservation Wayne. And the University agreed to that, amazingly. So, every, you know, all the ducks lined up with a whole lot of work. And then the next task came, which was—we had to oversee the coordination of the restoration of the building.

DD: Yeah.

WC: And at a certain point within this whole controversy that first year when there was a reprieve, "no demolition of the building," the Board of Governors passed a motion that said at the President's recommendation I think, that no university monies would go into the Mackenzie House effort. The University translated that literally, Preservation Wayne is a Wayne State University organization; we couldn't just go out and raise money because people have to write their checks to Wayne State. Preservation Wayne was not a

501c3 non-profit organization, it was a student organization, so the Development Office of Wayne State took that literally that their staff could not spend any time processing grants or donations that were made to Preservation Wayne for the Mackenzie House. So we couldn't get anywhere with the Development Office. So we were told to go out and find money, but at the same time, the Development Office was saying, "We can't work with you because we've been told no university money can go into that building."

DD: Oh…

WC: So we go back to the Board of Governors, and say, "You authorized us to go out and raise money, but your administration is blocking us from being able to do so by literally interpreting this "no university money will go in," so [that meant] even soft money or labor.

DD: Yeah, so—

WC: So, it was just kind of like it never stopped. There was always another hurdle to go over, but we got over that hurdle. The Board said, "Okay, that's ridiculous, of course…"

DD: Good.

WC: "…administration, allow the Development Office to work with you [Preservation Wayne]." So we became the only university student group that had an account at the Wayne State Fund Office. Um, so that then facilitated the fundraising piece.

Then it came to overseeing the restoration. We knew we had to play a role with the University's Facilities Department because we now had people committed to the preservation of the building and the University was more used to tearing buildings down than restoring them, so we wanted to make sure we had the right craftspeople coming in, the right contractors coming in, an appropriate architect who knew how to deal with a historic building. And they were cooperative. The Facilities Department was very cooperative. By that point things started to shift and the whole attitude of the University started to shift.

DD: Was there anyone from Wayne State that was on board, or like, guiding you through this, even professors or faculty?

WC: That's really interesting—from a power position, on the Board of Governors, yes. And one of the first Board of Governors we talked to was the first African American female elected to Wayne State's Board of Governors, Dauris Jackson. And she actually signed the petition in support of saving the House when all her board members were opposed. The second was another female board member, Mildred Jefferies. Mildred Jefferies was very instrumental in the labor movement and the women's rights movement and she was sympathetic to the cause and was very astute politically and so she started to

inform us on how to approach the Board of Governors and in a more sophisticated, political strategy.

So we started to make inroads with board members and we asked to meet with the board members. Michael Einheuser, who is probably the only board member still living from that time, he was the youngest member of the Wayne State Board of Governors when he was elected. He was an attorney; he came behind it. Mr. Atkinson, first name escapes me at the moment [Leon], an African American member of the Board of Governors also came behind it. There were a few members who were very supportive of the administration and took a negative view, but one by one we started bringing them around. So it was a matter of lobbying them individually and privately as well as a group publicly.

DD: Yeah, yeah. Okay, so the Mackenzie House wasn't your only success. Of course, there were other buildings. What were the other buildings that you saved in addition to the Mackenzie House?

WC: Well, certainly the Mackenzie House took the total focus up until 1981, which, the building by that point was restored and Preservation Wayne and the University Cultural Center Association, today's Midtown, Incorporated, moved in. So at that point, yeah, we were able to free up time to figure out what to do next. And there were two questions. One was what project to do next, but the other was what to do with the organization because we had evolved so quickly within a few years, way beyond what the group was when it was first started and had this success under our belts and learned how to kind of work the politics of preservation while still maintaining the passion for preservation.

So, and the original founding members of the group had moved on, basically graduated. Allen had moved to New York, Marilyn was still supportive of the group and I remember she got very involved with the effort to save the downtown Hudson's building and later became instrumental in founding Cityscape Detroit, which is another group that no longer exists, but was active at the time downtown. So, I was kind of left, everyone else had left and I was still here, because I was still at school and still working, but I needed to recreate the organization because we were losing our original members to graduation and life and careers. Um, so we did kind of a self-study analysis of what we should do and decided that there really wasn't any citywide preservation organization at that time. There were various other groups trying to become that, but we decided we should try and become a professional preservation organization, even if it would take many years to accomplish that. And we started to refocus on surveying, identifying historic buildings in the area, doing National Register nomination forms, going back to how the group formed originally, the major project it was involved with, and also keeping track of where Wayne State was going with its own historic properties. There were a number of buildings that were scheduled for demolition in the immediate community either by the City of Detroit for Wayne State or by Wayne State. And several buildings came up.

So the quick answer to your question of other buildings that I can think of that are there today as a result of Preservation Wayne's advocacy on one level or another is the

Robson-Dodge House on West Forest, which is the house between Second and Third on the north side that was part of a whole block that was scheduled for demolition. Ah—Preservation Wayne was contacted by people living in that building, who were being threatened with eviction for demolition, and played a role in helping get that stopped and those buildings saved. That is the area that has since been hosting Dally in the Alley for many years…

DD: Oh, yeah—

WC: …it's kind of the activism around trying to save that block of buildings that sparked Dally in the Alley. It all takes place within that block. Um, the other house, which is at Second and Hancock, the northwest corner, which I think is still today the Central Alliance Church. It was built first as a private residence, but soon became—no I think it was originally built as the Detroit Federation of Women's Club and was a wonderful building that has been saved as a result. [*Interviewer's Note*: *Correction supplied by WC post interview. This building at Second and Hancock was originally built as a private residence in the 1890's and was known as the Butler House. It was later purchased by the Detroit Federation of Women's Clubs and by the 1970's was known as the Central Alliance Church.*] The Smith House on Woodward, which is right next to the Maccabees Building, one of the five surviving mansions of Woodward—

DD: I know where that is.

WC: It's ah, that was threatened for demolition by the Detroit Board of Education and Preservation Wayne intervened at the appropriate time, working with key people from the Board of Education to try to stop the demolition. And that building is still there, it's now owned by Wayne State. Unfortunately it's vacant, I don't know what the future of that is, but it's still there. And I would say that, ah—well, the Linsell House on the main campus, which we lost two other buildings that were next to it, the Monteith Center [an historic house on what is now Gullen Mall, which was the student center for the Monteith Honors Studies program] and another building, there were three houses, historic houses there, but that building got saved. And I'd say really the other historic houses on campus survived in part because of the effort to change the way the University approached campus development, or all those buildings were going to be demolished.

Preservation Wayne got involved in a big, another battle. Probably around '81-'82, I think. We managed to get Preservation Wayne members, including myself, appointed to the University Planning Commission, which was revising the university's master plan, and we tried to become voices for the historic buildings on campus as well as preservation in the community. And we were able to stop demolition process for an entire block of houses that were on Putnam, which basically housed student organizations at that time: *The South End*, Wayne State had a student radio station, there were a bunch of Engineering groups, fraternity groups, were all on this block of houses on Putnam from what is now Gullen Mall to Anthony Wayne Drive. And then we had the three houses on

the main campus on Gullen Mall, the surviving one is the Linsell House, there were two others next to it, there was another historic house across from Gullen Mall.

Um, Wayne State as a result of pressure from Preservation Wayne hired a firm to come in and survey all of its older buildings and identify which buildings were—had sufficient condition to be preserved, which ones were in a deteriorated state, but could be preserved with investment, and which ones were beyond any hope. And which ones had historic value and which ones didn't. It was Louis Redstone and Associates, an architectural firm, was hired to carry out that architectural survey and the results came in to the—the strategic planning group, I forget the official name it was given at that time, but I was a member of that, and the results were actually quite positive for most of the historic houses where Redstone and Associates had identified that many of those buildings, with appropriate investment, could be saved and reused.

At one point within a few weeks, all of the members of that commission were told to turn in their documents, which we did not. We saved ours, Preservation Wayne did, and they came back a few weeks later with a revised document, where all the condition categories had been dropped by one category. Buildings that had been identified as being worthy of preservation were dropped down to being questionable, those that were questionable were dropped down to candidates for demolition, and those that were identified as good/excellent condition were dropped down to fair to poor condition. The results had been changed. This document was then turned over to the Board of Governors during this period when demolition had been put on hold. Basically, the Board of Governors said, "We are going to put a hold on all demolition of older buildings until an official survey is done by an outside source to determine which buildings should be preserved, from an objective viewpoint." Well, the objective viewpoint had obviously been altered by certain people in the administration. So the Board of Governors were not given the original results from the Redstone and Associates, they were given a revised document where the Redstone Associates name had been taken off, and all the condition categories had been changed. […] I mean, we couldn't believe it—this was a huge, unethical…

DD: Right.

WC: …change of information that had taken place…

DD: Unprecedented, yeah.

WC: …in order to substantiate their position, an already established position that these buildings should be torn down. And we couldn't rally enough at that point, questioning the process because it was so big at that point; it wasn't just one building, it was like fifteen buildings. But, the fact that the group brought that up and raised this red flag of questionable results, *The South End* covered it, the vice president of the University, a man named Charles Sturtz, came behind the scenes to us and said, "Okay you guys, you kinda got us. So, let's go in a back room and make a deal. Which of—you know—which five buildings," I forget what number he identified, like six buildings, "do you think

absolutely have to be saved and the rest have to go, but you can decide which ones have to be saved."

DD: So, they just kind of gave you an ultimatum. Said, "Chose."

WC: Yeah, it was really interesting and I remember us coming back to the Mackenzie House and thinking, "What do we do? Because we could go to the back room and negotiate and save a couple of buildings because the university is over a barrel and we decided—and I think you kind of wanted to ask me what were lessons learned?

DD: Yeah, yeah.

WC: We decided to go for broke, which was, "No, our goal is to change the way the university deals with planning. If we go in a back room, this isn't going to change that. We want to affect the way decisions are made for the future as well, not just for right now, that all buildings would always be evaluated to see if they're worthy of preservation rather than just being thrown into a "to be demolished" category.

DD: But that was a lesson you regretted?

WC: It was a—it was a lesson, yeah, yes, I do regret that. Because we could have—what happened was that of course we were outgunned and outflanked. Um, we decided to take the high road, "We're going to affect the way the university plans," we didn't have the power to do that. But we would've had the power to save more buildings than were saved if we had agreed to go in and do the back room deal. So there are times when I think you do, you can't save as much as you like. It's going to take maybe another ten or twenty years before the situation really does change. Your power is not as much as you'd like to think it is as an activist and sometimes going in and doing the dirty deal will at least be better than if you lose. And we lost that one. All those buildings except for the Linsell House came down. Nevertheless, I think we started to have an impact and the University started to move away from this idea that all older buildings would be torn down automatically with a few rare acceptations like the Beecher House and the Mackenzie House, which we had to fight for anyway. And, the planning process had started to shift and the way, you know, we redeveloped the city started to shift. Oh my gosh, I got really worried that I would go over here.

DD: That's Okay. Okay, so, um—

WC: You're never going to be able to transcribe this. You poor thing. Do you want to stop now?

DD: We'll do one more question and then we'll call it a night.

WC: You'll be working on this until next year.

DD: [Laughs] Um, okay, so, all right—out of all these questions that I had prepared, ah—okay, how, what about the—education? What could be created to help inform people about the value of preservation? I know that you talked about like the lessons you learned as an organization, but what are some things just for the public that need to be understood—or what types of education, maybe, to help with even the value of historical locations in Detroit or anything like that?

WC: Oh gosh, that's a great question and a really broad one.

DD: Yeah [laughs].

WC: I'm trying to think about how to—you know I guess if we just stay with the Wayne State theme, or just the Wayne State community/Midtown theme, well, I think probably one really good thing that could continue to happen here is to continue to throw a light through education about how the university developed, how it grew out of an existing neighborhood in an urban setting and therefore is unique as a university compared to the University of Michigan, or Oakland [University], or Michigan State, where those were planned campuses, they didn't grow out of existing neighborhoods. I mean, literally Wayne State was all buildings that were not specifically built for education until World War II, aside from Old Main, which was of course a high school. So Wayne State learned how to adaptively reuse an old church, an old hotel, a former car dealership, an old house, to make them into offices or classrooms, or whatever. Now clearly not all of those buildings were well suited for those purposes and you'll always need new buildings, but there's always a role for those kinds of buildings in a campus setting and they're what make the campus unique and connect the campus with the surrounding community.

DD: Yeah.

WC: So I think that Wayne State being proud of that and proud of the fact that it's probably, aside from maybe Detroit Public Schools, the largest single owner of historic buildings in this city, and now with so many school buildings being torn down, I mean Wayne State might be largest single owner of historic buildings in Detroit. It has an incredible range of historic buildings now and continues to acquire them. You know, they just recently acquired the Hecker House, now the Tierney Alumni House, probably one of the premier historic buildings of Detroit, has just come into Wayne's portfolio.

So, promoting that, educating people about that, educating students about that, how the campus formed, how it developed, how it connects with Detroit's development, Detroit's architecture, helping people feel connection between the community and the university physically, geographically, architecturally, and creating public awareness of that, and learning how to maximize the benefits of that I think is something that is unique to Wayne State. You really can't go anywhere and learn about the history of how the university developed or what this neighborhood was like from the teens to the 1920's, to the 30's, 40's, 50's, 60's on. So I think that's hopefully a role that Preservation Detroit, which started as Preservation Wayne, might continue to carry as part of its portfolio.

DD: Yeah.

WC: Uh, maybe the role of this building, the Mackenzie House, could tell that story, help tell the story of the development of Wayne State and its architecture.

DD: Yeah, and I think just keeping these types of buildings like the Mackenzie House present and up and running is even a good reflection of that, you know, like the value, where Wayne State came from. Well, is there anything else that you would like to add [laughs] before we close?

WC: Well, without you having to transcribe it, I just—I hope you have something that will automatically help you transcribe this, or just transcribe this word-for-word. Ah, I should probably at least mention about East Ferry Avenue.

DD: Yeah.

WC: Because, you know, you asked me about other buildings that had been saved. East Ferry Avenue is a Preservation Wayne success story.

DD: Mmhm, a significant one.

WC: Preservation Wayne is not the only group obviously that's had a role in saving that street, many other groups have, including Midtown, Incorporated, done development work on Ferry Street. But Preservation Wayne was really the first organization to step forward to get the—going back to 1976 is when the group got the first block of Ferry Street on the National Register and then fought to get it [the first three blocks of East Ferry Street from Woodward to Beaubien Street], onto the City of Detroit Historic Register in 1981, which was very instrumental in pivoting that street, which was all going down hill and really was scheduled for clearance, for one entity or another, into a preservation mode, and then working consistently with raising public awareness of the architectural significance of that street, from Jewish history, African American history of that street, the white gentile history of that street, from the mansion owners to the working class people who lived on that street. That was the continued education effort that Preservation Wayne undertook with tours and publications and then started meeting with the property owners to help people start shifting the direction of the street toward preservation. And dealing with the big guns. I mean the Detroit Institute of Arts, which owned the entire side practically of the south side of the first block of Ferry Street, after Wayne State University sold the houses that had belonged to the Merrill Palmer Institute to the DIA. Um, then dealing with the DIA about the future of those buildings and dealing with CCS about the buildings [they owned] on the second block.

So the group decided that, to really—because so many things were threatened in the city, and there were so many things pulling at our group's attention, we decided to focus on a very specific geographic location in a critical spot with very important buildings, that by preserving even four blocks of that street you could have a big ripple effect. And, you know, over twenty years, I'd say from 1981 to you know 2001, it worked. In 1981 the

effort was just starting, by 2001 the Hecker House was saved and restored [by Charfoos and Christensen], the Inn on Ferry Street had opened, CCS had stopped demolition on the second block, and was investing in houses, infill housing was going in [being built], people were renovating houses, so today—these things take time, but today—there's not one vacant [abandoned] house on the street. Everything else has been invested in. And that's rare for Detroit. So I think that Preservation Wayne deserves a lot of credit for really shepherding that and then bringing other people into that process, Midtown, Incorporated being primary.

DD: Yeah. Well, I just want to thank you so much for your time, coming in and sharing your story and the story of Preservation Wayne. And yeah, thank you so much.

WC: You're welcome; it's very kind of you to ask.

END

Interviewer's note: The Mackenzie House is currently occupied by Preservation Detroit, the historic preservation organization first established as Preservation Wayne. The address of the Mackenzie House as of December 2015 is 4735 Cass Avenue on the northwest corner of the intersection with West Forest in Detroit's Cass Corridor. However, the projected 7.5 million Valende Jazz Center has been scheduled for the Hilberry Theater and will be part of the proposed theater complex, which will cause the Mackenzie House to be moved. The fate of the Mackenzie House is once again in question.