



THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER  
OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA  
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA



# Oral History Interview

with

## Al Cox

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**Interviewer:** *Kerry James Reed*

**Narrator:** *Al Cox*

**Location of Interview:**

*Lloyd House, 220 N Washington St, Alexandria, VA 22314*

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**Transcriber:** *Kerry James Reed*

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### **Summary:**

*Al Cox reflects on growing up in Dallas Texas, learning and implementing preservation architectural practices in his community, the projects he worked on while serving as the City of Alexandria's Historic Preservation Architect, and the changes he has seen occur in Alexandria since the early 1990s.*

**Notes:**

*This recording is part of a special project about the history of historical preservation in Alexandria. Kerry James Reed served as an Oral History Intern in the summer of 2023 and worked on this special project.*

## Table of Contents and Keywords

Minute	Page	Topic
00:02	4	Introduction
02:08	5	Childhood in Dallas
04:34	6	Experience with Propaganda concerning Texas History
08:28	7	Learning Preservation Architecture, and Restoring Dallas Arts District
13:47	8	Urban Pioneers and Historic Preservation Efforts in Dallas
16:26	9	Personal Opinions about the importance of Historic Preservation Architecture
20:30	10	Moving to Alexandria & Memories concerning the Growing Focus on Preservation in the latter half of the 20 <sup>th</sup> century
27:53	12	Efforts to Educate Residents of OHAD of Meaning/Importance of Historic Districts
35:07	14	Projects worked on as Historic Preservation Architect
47:09	18	Changes in Alexandria
57:03	20	Working on James Bland and Ramsey Homes Developments
58:05	21	Importance of Materially Significant and Culturally Significant Preservation
1:03:57	23	How Developments in Alexandria have affected Community
1:10:09	25	Closing Remarks

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<b>General</b>	Historic Preservation Architecture; PTO Office; Architecture; Development of Alexandria (Waterfront, Old Town, Parker-Gray, Carlyle, etc.)
<b>People</b>	Al Cox, Kathy Cox
<b>Places</b>	Dallas, Texas; Dallas Arts District; City of Alexandria; Old Town; Parker-Gray

**Al Cox:** [00:00:02] My name is Al Cox. I am 70 years old. Today's date is July 18th, 2023, and we're doing this at the Lloyd House in Old Town, Alexandria. [00:00:12][9.9]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:00:13] My name is Kerry James Reed. I am 26 years old. Today's date is July 18th, 2023, and we are at the Lloyd House. So Al, thank you so much for helping me out with this project. Truly means a lot. And I guess we can just start from the very beginning. Where were you born? [00:00:31][17.2]

**Al Cox:** [00:00:32] Dallas, Texas. [00:00:32][0.6]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:00:34] Dallas, Texas. So you grew up there as well, I presume? [00:00:37][3.0]

**Al Cox:** [00:00:38] I did, yes. And family is still there. [00:00:41][3.8]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:00:44] Do you have any particularly fond memories of your time spent growing up in Dallas? [00:00:47][3.7]

**Al Cox:** [00:00:49] Um, it was a very good, stable place to grow up at that time. I mean, aside from some things like Kennedy assassination and things like that, but otherwise. Yeah. Good public schools, good family environment, boy Scouts, church, all those kinds of things. So, yes. [00:01:07][17.7]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:01:09] Did you go to school in Dallas as well? [00:01:11][2.1]

**Al Cox:** [00:01:13] Yes. Public school in Texas from elementary school through high school. And then Texas Tech University for my undergraduate architecture degree. [00:01:20][7.1]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:01:22] Okay. When did you move to Alexandria? [00:01:24][2.4]

**Al Cox:** [00:01:26] We moved up here in 1989. I wanted to do a sabbatical. Architecture in the United States was not doing real good then. It was right after the savings and loan crisis and Dallas has one of those boom and bust economies that, especially for an architect, is feast or famine. And that was a particular period of famine. And since my desired specialty was historic preservation, my partner at the time in our architecture firm was kind enough to take over the firm and let me believe and move up here. [00:02:05][39.3]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:02:08] So you mentioned that you had a specialization, historic preservation architecture. Was there any moments from your childhood, any buildings you saw, any monuments that sort of pushed you in that direction? [00:02:17][9.6]

**Al Cox:** [00:02:19] My parents were very fond of going out on the weekends and going to antique shops, flea markets. We toured every museum in the southwest. We would go out on, you know, Mother would have a station wagon packed on Friday afternoon and we'd drive to New Mexico or Colorado or something. So, we spent all our vacations doing camping and travel like that. So, it was just kind of an understanding of history. My family has always been, well, Father in particular was always very interested in history. His grandmother had written a book on Texas history and had

grown up in Huntsville, Texas, with Sam Houston's grandchildren. So there had been a long tie back to, at least from Dad's oral family history, we had come over sometime probably in the very early 19th century, the East Coast. And through on the whatever that trail was called, you know, gone to Texas when you went through Tennessee and Alabama and then down to Texas before it was a country. And so had kind of run back and forth from Louisiana to Texas while the Indians and Santana were chasing the settlers. So, the family had been in Texas for a long time and was very interested in Texas history. Looking back on it now as an adult and with a little more understanding of real history and not just Texas propaganda, a lot of the history is probably false. Nevertheless, that's where a history, a family history, kind of developed an interest in what happened before, because that's what puts you in space and time to let you know what's happening today and how you can react to the constant change that you have in your environment. [00:04:32][132.7]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:04:34] You mentioned propaganda. That's pretty interesting. So in high school, the history books, [Al laughs] would they say, you know, remember the Alamo and all that stuff? Can you describe some of that propaganda? [00:04:41][7.5]

**Al Cox:** [00:04:41] Absolutely. Yes. At that time, this would have been in the 1950s and 60s in Texas. It was, of course, about fighting the evil Mexican empire. And Santa Anna was a tyrant. And yeah, the Alamo was the, you know, the greatest thing that ever happened. And when Sam Houston went into San Jacinto and captured Santa Anna while they were asleep, you know, he became a hero and then the first president of the country of Texas. Looking back on it and studying history since then. Steven F. Austin had brought people to Texas as colonists because the Mexican government gave him land and the promise in Central and eastern Texas was to be able to grow cotton and the fields were certainly being diminished in Virginia, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi. And so free land and good cotton growing area was great. Unfortunately, Santa Anna and the Mexican government had outlawed slavery just like late 1820s, early 1830s. So the real revolution in Texas was not about freedom and independence. It was like much of the American South, I believe, looking back on it. And they call this revisionist history in Texas. And I think you would be subject to being strung up and hung on a barbed wire fence. But it was about slavery. It was about the ability to have slaves on your cotton plantation in Texas. So, that's why they fought the war and they killed most of the Tejanos that helped them with that revolution, right after the war. The Texas Rangers that are so lauded were, god, they were a mercenary group that was roaming Texas. Just, you know, "One riot, one Ranger," was the slogan. But that was because they just went in and killed everybody. That's my personal opinion, looking back on it. But once I started reading history for myself, I couldn't stand to live there anymore. So we left Dallas more because the city had no soul. [00:07:05][143.3]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:07:06] Hmm. [00:07:06][0.0]

**Al Cox:** [00:07:07] My wife and I felt like it was all about money and big air and fancy cars and didn't have a sense of grounding or history. The famous statement from the mayor there, Mayor Johnson, was "keep the dirt flying," and that he would do anything necessary to raise money to build a new symphony hall as long as he didn't have to go. So, you know, on a visit up here to the East Coast, saw Alexandria and just kind of fell in love with it. It was so different. And I had always been in love with European cities. The human scale, you know, the development of urban areas before the automobile. And that's still what at least Old Town Alexandria was. I did my graduate work at University of Virginia and at the school there in Venice. And so, you know, to me, I was trying to learn historic preservation, as the Europeans have been doing it for 150 years. And we were playing

catch up in the late 20th century here. So, that's my memories of Texas. And I go back as little as possible. [00:08:25][78.5]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:08:28] So during your studies, was there a big push in the architectural field in general on historic preservation architecture, or was that something, you know, went towards yourself? [00:08:38][10.1]

**Al Cox:** [00:08:39] When I was at Texas Tech, that was a five year degree from 1971 to '76. There was only one other school in the country that I'm aware of that had a course or at least a degree in historic preservation, and that was Columbia in New York. So, I took architectural history courses, but there was really no such thing as preservation courses in university. It wasn't an academic field of study yet. History was. Architectural history was, but historic preservation wasn't. I mean, the the National Historic Preservation Act was only adopted in 1966, so it was only ten years after that. And the National Register had just been established, you know, by law in '66, but it was '68 or thereabouts before it got established. So, we were making it up as we went along. And in our first year of architecture practice in Texas, preservation was more what today we would call adaptive use. You know, it was taking old warehouse buildings and turning them into condos, apartments, offices, things like that in downtown Dallas and, you know, old spaghetti warehouse and things like that were the restaurants that were going into those warehouses. So that was what was making the economics of those work. So, Dallas had a very, very small historic district. The neighborhood where our office was, was kind of an arts historic district, had some old Victorian houses. It was Dallas's first streetcar suburb from the late 19th century. So, we had restored the building to do our office. And then Kathy and I bought a place there that was all we could afford at the time. And it was, would certainly be considered, a teardown in almost any rational person's eyes. It only had three walls. It had been gutted to turn into an antique shop and they didn't get the zoning that they needed. It was still residential zoning, so it stood there vacant for five or six years. And so we were able to buy it relatively affordably. But trying to get money, you know, you couldn't get a mortgage downtown and we hadn't been working long enough to have an established credit record. So, you know, we were able to get one home improvement loan that I think was a \$10,000 home improvement loan because my wife was an administrative assistant working at the big bank downtown. And that \$10,000 loan, even though she was a bank employee, it was a 22 3/4 percent interest rate on a three year note. So, historic preservation was difficult. You know, urban pioneers were the only people that were doing anything. Our neighborhood there was a terrific group of gays and artists and lawyers and architects. And so we all kind of banded together in this tiny little neighborhood that was a streetcar suburb that had been gentrified and absorbed by an adjacent Freedman's Town. So it was largely African-American. It was largely welfare for the residents who lived there. There were whorehouses and gambling houses and crack houses, this was before crack, but drug houses, shooting galleries, that sort of thing, all across the street and down the alley. Friday nights were a lot of fun because they'd be out chasing each other with shotguns running up and down the alley from the gambling house. So, what that prepared us for was when Kathy and I moved up here. Moving to St. Thomas was no big deal. That was what we were used to. We just thought that was an inner city neighborhood and we could see the potential in the Victorian houses. So, we bought an old foreclosure that again would have been a tear down if it hadn't been in the historic district. We bought that in 1993 and have spent the last, what is that, 30 years now trying to restore it and fix it back up. It had been a rooming house and was in pretty bad shape. So, in both cases, living in it and doing the work ourselves in spare time. When you're not trying to run two businesses and that sort of thing. That's how urban pioneers used to go in. And today, looking back,

they would call it gentrification. But these are neighborhoods that were going to be bulldozed. [00:13:43][304.7]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:13:47] So when you say urban pioneers, do you mean people within the community that try to do these things? [00:13:51][4.4]

**Al Cox:** [00:13:52] Yes, but usually from a different part of that community. They weren't the people that were living there. Those folks either had money... There's an experience that Kathy and I had with two or three of our neighbors in downtown Dallas, and this was right in downtown Dallas. We were right next to what is today, the arts district. And you could throw a rock and hit the Federal Reserve Bank in Dallas. The elderly, African-American widows that lived in that neighborhood were some of our very best neighbors. They were sweet as they could be. You know, any time that you wanted to have a neighborhood picnic or a fundraiser or something, they were there to help. But they had been married to gentlemen who had worked their fingers to the bone, were good businessmen, and had acquired residential properties in the neighborhood. So, you were either a renter and usually in a rooming house or you owned three, four, six properties, and they weren't kept up particularly well. Some of them were rented. Well, most of them were rented by the week. Some of them were rented by hour, but that's a whole different story. And so that, again, is kind of the experience Kathy and I had when we moved here. There were either renters that were longtime renters that were in the Victorian townhouses that had been converted to rooming houses. And looking at the old Sanborn maps and some of the business records, they had probably been rental properties and rooming houses since maybe World War One, certainly since World War Two, when Alexandria had a housing crisis back then and you had people coming here to work in government to do Torpedo Factory. You also had Potomac Yard, things like that in the early 20th century. There were half a dozen railroad stations in Alexandria, in Old Town in the early 20th century, late 19th and early 20th, before they built Alexandria Union Station. So, the story was these people would work in the warehouses, in the loading and unloading the trains, and that's why they were in Uptown, as it was called then. [00:16:25][152.7]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:16:26] So we've mentioned preservation, historic preservation, architecture thus far. But we haven't really got to what it means to you personally. Like when you see these, you know, buildings or sites that have been rundown or, you know, whatever the case may be, what does it mean to you to be able to go in and try to preserve these pieces of history? [00:16:46][19.9]

**Al Cox:** [00:16:48] Well, without getting too woo woo about it, I firmly believe that there is a spirit inherent in the buildings and the materials. There is a hand craftsmanship that is evident of all buildings built prior to industrialization that occurred between World War One and World War Two. And that's why the period of significance for both what is now Uptown Parker-Gray and the Old and Historic District run from 1749 up through 1932, because that's the date when you went from having to take a plane and plane moldings by hand and you had to saw things with a pit saw or a saw out of your toolbox. So, there was more care. The materials were better when they were still using old growth wood. You can't reproduce things like that today. I mean, that old growth wood is gone and a lot of the wood today is grown, you know, on a plantation. And it's for pulp production. It's not for wood. They want you to build using vinyl siding and vinyl windows today. And that's all throwaway architecture. That's not good for the planet. So it's not sustainable. The building proportions today are not what they were back then. So, there's an inherent beauty in the form and the details and the materials of those buildings. In addition, prior to the widespread use of the

automobile, you know, starting from 1940s, 50s, those communities were smaller. They were walking distance. They had to be. Even when the streetcar was introduced in the late 19th and early 20th century, you still had pockets of neighborhoods. And so you had servants living very close to the people who hired them if they were domestic servants. You lived close to where you worked. You live close to church. You live close to a main street, that was the business district. And you saw your neighbors out on the street. And I think there was a lot more unity in the community. I mean, granted, there's always been economic disparities and you've had differences in religions. But one of the things that I had noted about Alexandria when we moved here was you had Jewish synagogues and Catholic churches and Presbyterian and Anglican. And I mean, you had a wide downtown Methodist church, you have the downtown Baptist Church. Very economically and socially diverse and racially diverse community. In the early years, in the 19th century in Alexandria, you had Freedman's towns and and before that, just freed African-American settlers living all over Old Town in all four quadrants of Old Town. And it really wasn't until the Jim Crow late 19th, early 20th, up through the mid 20th century, that you had the majority of the African-Americans living in the northwest quadrant in what today is Parker Gray. And so I think, again, with the automobile and with the advent of Jim Crow, things deteriorated a little bit. And I'm hopeful that we're working back toward a more balanced economic and diverse society here. [00:20:29][220.3]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:20:30] So when you moved to Alexandria in 1993, did you already have a position as the historic preservation architecture, or how did that come about? [00:20:38][7.6]

**Al Cox:** [00:20:38] No. One of the primary reasons for moving up here again was to there was a professor at the University of Virginia, Mario Deval Morano. Who is, was, rest his soul, a Count. And he and his brothers owned their grandmother's house in Vicenza, in Italy. That's the Villa Rotunda, probably the most famous house in the world. And Mario had come here in the late 1970s to be a professor at the University of Virginia and developed a, I think, a national reputation at that time when preservation was still in its infancy as an academic pursuit, and created a historic preservation program at UVA. Certainly building on the legacy of Thomas Jefferson's architectural pursuits. And I read about Mario in the American Institute of Architects Journal and thought, wow, what he's teaching, that historic preservation isn't just preserving buildings, you know, that were the high end, high style or high status buildings owned by dead white guys as a museum isn't the only way to do historic preservation. And that Europe has been doing this for years, where the whole Centro Storico, the downtown historic area is where you live, where you work, where you dine, you have outdoor dining, you have the whole social life there. They have the Passeggiata in the evening where you go out and you walk around and you have gelato and see your friends and your neighbors. That was missing in the United States. And I thought Alexandria, and I didn't just think it, they were a national pioneer in recognizing walkable, historic urban neighborhoods and that they're special things. What I don't think they realized back then is how precious and fragile they are. But yeah, I mean, the people that fought for historic preservation here in the 1930s, Gabe Montague Moore and some of the others that wrote books about it, wrote pamphlets about it, opened their houses for house tours. Polly Wholefish, who went around, started a company and what today we would call rehab, but at the time was considered historic restoration of townhouses and, you know, kind of a revolving fund flipping them and doing the next one. They're the ones that preserved Old Town. And when the threat of urban renewal came along in the 1970s, they're the ones that pushed back, ran that New York planner out of town and got council to recognize, okay, six blocks is enough. We're not going to do the 20 blocks we were originally going to do. I think we're facing another urban renewal threat right now. But education and preservation is not a one and done thing.



It's constant change and it constantly changes because the audience is different. As I said, when I started out in the 70s, people were urban pioneers. I mean, think about *This Old House* that was pioneered on PBS, had just come out in, I think, 1975, so people didn't even know what it was, and they were creating a national audience for that. And we never missed an episode on Saturday of *This Old House* because they were showing us how to do window restoration and siding restoration and where to get parts. That culture doesn't exist today, at least not in any widespread form. The people in Old Town today, you could count on two hands the number of people that do any work on their own house in Alexandria today. I mean, if you just paid a million and a half or two and a half million dollars for a house, you're likely not somebody that's going out doing sweat equity, scraping paint and reglazing windows. And today, kids aren't raised knowing how to do that. We don't have the tradition of trade schools that we used to. I mean, I think I was the last generation that had auto shop and home economics and those kinds of trade schools for kids in junior high and high school. So, you also have a larger wave of immigration here. Who is George Washington? What does he matter? Who cares if this is his hometown? There is a high percentage of people from the surveys who don't even know who George Washington is or what the three branches of the federal government are. So, you can't just hang your hat, you know, in tourism development on, "oh, this is George Washington's hometown and come here and see what it looked like in Washington walked the streets." They're more interested in where can I get a good margarita or a dirty martini. You know, it's a whole different audience. So, preservation has to evolve. And it will. I think the emphasis on the buildings and the craftsmanship and the human scale, the width of the streets, the width of the sidewalk, the street trees, the brick sidewalks, the wavy glass as you walk down the sidewalk and you see it shimmering from the sunlight. I think those things won't change. But you still have to let people know that it's there and it's special. I've been leading architecture tours for the American Institute of Architects during our Virginia Preservation Month for 27 years or so. People get really excited about it, and I spend 2 hours walking around on the sidewalk talking to them about mortar and why you should never use Portland cement mortar on bricks before 1920s and those kinds of things. And they come away and their eyes are wide open. And you can see them going up to Gadsby's Tavern and touching and feeling the brick, realizing somebody had a wood form and they had just dug a basement and they got the clay out of the basement and molded the brick and then built up fire and made a kiln and made that brick by hand. And it was a lot of work. You didn't go to Smoot Lumber and buy that stuff. So, I think it's not that people don't care, it's that they haven't been taught. Nobody's explained it to them. [00:27:51][432.7]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:27:53] So when we talked last, you mentioned that just as you said, lack of education was a big issue for residents in historic districts. Could you describe how you went about trying to educate residents of historic districts in Alexandria? [00:28:07][14.6]

**Al Cox:** [00:28:09] Well, in addition to Architecture Month, the Virginia Society of Architecture did, years ago, they established, and I think it was through the National Trust for Historic Preservation of Preservation Month. So the Board of Architectural Review staff worked closely with the Office of Historic Alexandria, and we would do demonstrations. We would have local craftsmen come in and do the paint stripping from brick, or we would show how to mix the old lime mortars and where you could get those products. We would regularly have lectures and tours. TWIG, of course, for the fundraising for the hospital, does tours of gardens during garden week, and so keeping those things alive helps a lot. Well, the reason I was hired by the city in 1991 was to help write the B.A.R.'s design guidelines. The board had never had design guidelines before. Even though we've had a board of architectural review here since 1946, we're the third oldest historic district in the United

States. But they had been derisively called the Board of Arbitrary Review for a long time because it was all about, it wasn't all about by any means, but it appeared to people, especially those who had just moved here and wanted to do a bedroom addition on their house or whatever, that you got approved if the board members knew you and you had good Christmas parties and not whether what you were doing was the right thing to do. There was also a bad habit by uneducated B.A.R. members of approving things because they were pretty, not because they were historically accurate, either materials or design. They didn't know architectural styles. A few board members did, of course, but it's a seven person board and if you walked into the B.A.R. in the 1980s it was seven old white guys sitting on the dais and it didn't have a good perception. So we tried to get more women on the board, which I think we were successful at. We did training for the board, so their decisions were more consistent and legally defensible. We had, a two year long citizen process where I worked with Dr. Peter Smith, who was the principal B.A.R. staff at that time, to create board design guidelines. While I was in graduate school, I had been an intern with the Preservation Alliance of Virginia down in Charlottesville and edited the manual on design review for State of Virginia for the review boards. In Dallas I had been director of the Dallas Historic Preservation League while I was an architect there and was on the Dallas Landmark Commission for a couple of years. And I was the president of our civic association when we were creating the historic district in downtown Dallas. So, I kind of came at it from multiple disciplines; as a homeowner, as somebody who had fought city hall, as somebody who had been a part of the commissions at city hall and as a member of a nonprofit organization trying to raise money to save old houses and do publications. So I think bringing some of those school of hard knocks kind of skills up here helped get a foothold with Old Town Civic Association, with Historic Alexandria Foundation, with the Historic Society, with some of those groups. And I think it was, I was trying really hard to build bridges between the government and city hall, the Board of Architectural Review and the citizen groups who lived here, and to explain the difference between exterior decorating and honest historic preservation and define what historic preservation is. And, you know, those guidelines were published in 1993, and they were, I think, very, very successful. It was a large citizen committee that Peter and I worked with. I did a lot of the graphics because, you know, back then it was the infancy of computers. We had an IBM Selectric word processor that you had to sign up and get in line to use. We had kept them in the closet in the planning office because they were so rare and valuable. And Peter and I had to go all the way to the city manager to get us a Apple Macintosh toaster computer, back in the old days, and it was horrendously expensive. The city manager wanted to know what the hell we needed this for. And one of the first Hewlett-Packard laser printers. But you couldn't do the graphics. You couldn't do the drawings on a computer. And so we had to draw them by hand and cut and paste them on an 8 1/2 by 11 sheet and photocopy them and photocopy the design guidelines. It was pretty Stone Age, but, you know, it worked. And since then, there's this thing called the interweb. And I think we were way behind the times. You know, they were 30 years old now. It was time to do new ones. So I'm working with a new committee of Board of Architectural Review members and with citizen input. I'm on that committee for the board to provide some institutional memory, both as a staff member and as somebody who helped write the guidelines to publish them again. And so they'll be available on your phone or your iPad online. Be much easier to look things up. There'll be good color graphics, color photos. All of those things we couldn't do back then. So, they're much more user friendly. And I hope that that will make them something that people rely on a little bit more and that the board members use more because they're no good if they're sitting on a shelf. [00:35:02][412.7]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:35:07] What are some of the projects you worked on while you were working with the city? [00:35:11][4.3]

**Al Cox:** [00:35:13] I was fortunate enough. My original employment with the city was for a two year contract to help edit the design guidelines. So, by '95 that contract was up and the city manager and Sheldon Lynn, who was the planning director, wanted to retain me, which was extremely flattering. And there was no architect position at City, and I was able to make the case that we needed a city architect to be a bridge between the different departments at the city. Because you had the Office of Historic Alexandria out doing one thing and General Services was supposedly maintaining the museums that they managed. But the two groups were at war all the time and weren't talking to each other. T.N.E.S. was out repaving streets and sidewalks without consulting the B.A.R. Code administration was approving building permits for things that hadn't been reviewed or approved by the B.A.R. And city owned historic buildings weren't being treated well. So they allowed me to create a position of city architect. It was the first that we had had in the history of Alexandria. And so I was able to work with all of those groups, with Parks and Rec, with T.N.E.S, with Code, with everybody. My primary role was still, at that time, Board of Architectural Review staff, but I also was doing a lot more work with the development staff. We had begun, after the 1992 master plan in the city, doing more of these new special use permits, that the legislature in Richmond that just instituted and allowed Alexandria to do. So, we were now doing much more than just street site plan reviews on large development projects. And design was something that really hadn't been done before. And the citizens were demanding that if we were going to get these big new buildings that they'd look better, and that they look like historic Alexandria, whatever that meant to those people at that time. So, I got to work on projects like Cameron Station. I became the staff for the Carlisle Design Review Board, which was just getting going. And so guided that board through design review of Carlyle Towers. And I became actually staff working in Code administration jointly for Code and for Planning and Zoning when the Patent and Trademark Office was being constructed. And I had been a planner in development on that when it was going through plan review. And so the Code official, the building official, Art Dahlberg, met me out in Market Square one day and said, "I've got a proposition for you, we need to open the field office," because Charles Smith, who was the landlord for the Patent and Trademark Office in the 13 buildings that they were in in Crystal City, was doing everything that they could to keep PTO from leaving. And we had a developer here who had won the competition through General Services to build a unified campus for the Patent and Trademark Office here. But they were throwing up all kinds of environmental lawsuits and all these things to try and delay them so that they had to pay this \$25 million penalty for leaving Crystal City late. So, our window to get these buildings built was getting smaller and smaller because we had to get them built, get them final inspections, get them through the design review board and get all of that done before their clock ran out in Crystal City. So, I had the great pleasure of working in Code, managing that field office. It was a joint field office of T.N.E.S and Code Administration and Planning and Zoning and got to work with Kerry Donnelly and David Speck when Kerry was mayor on that project. Because they felt like, and in hindsight I believe they were absolutely correct, our residential to commercial tax base was out of balance and we needed more commercial to avoid some of the costs of infrastructure improvements and things that we needed to do to run the city, parks and open space that people were demanding. We needed more commercial development, but this project was extraordinarily controversial. It was a knockdown-drag-out, fights, screaming matches, pickets in front of city hall. Controversial. And people in the west end of the city were absolutely convinced because of all of the negative press thanks to the PR people that Charles Smith hired to write letters to the editor and letters and articles in the Alexandria paper about all of the

horrible traffic that was going to come from PTO, the people in the West End were convinced they wouldn't be able to back out of their driveway. And when I would be at a special event or a dinner party or something, they would find out I worked for the city and come up and say, "When is PTO going to open? Because we need to put our house on the market so that we can sell before it opens because we know the traffic is going to be so bad." And I would say, "man, that opened a year ago. It's fully occupied. We have seen no increase in traffic and that's what the traffic studies had had indicated." And they were just astonished. They thought I was a liar. So anyway, there was a lot of stories like that. I mean, I think PTO, I had the pleasure of working with Skid, Maroons, and Merrill, Gary Haney and and some of their designers out in New York and Washington office, some of the best in the world. They got that building design, got it through the review board. We designed a building that was red brick on the outside of the campus, but on the inside was more glass, more open. What we came to call a geode kind of project because it was more crystal and glass, great public parks on the inside with tiny gardens. We got a lot of city benefits out of that, streetscape improvements and that sort of thing. And the parking garages were half empty. PTO didn't have enough cars there to even fill the parking garages after a parking reduction because people were working remotely. And PTO was a leading government agency for doing that. So Carlyle was something that was one of the first transit-oriented new urbanist developments in the country. And I think Alexandria was able to be a pioneer in that. Jack Robinson, Cooper Robertson was the firm out of New York. Jack Robinson had been dean at University of Virginia back at that time. And, you know, I think this was a new thing, and I think it was seen by the council at that time as being the new downtown of Alexandria, so that the businesses in the commercial could be there, mixed with residential without having to destroy Old Town. So it was next to Old Town, but not in competition with it. We needed office spaces that had bigger floor plates, that had taller ceilings, that had modern amenities and cable, you know, for infrastructure that was necessary for the Internet, things like that. So, I think it was it was a great project. And we worked on a total of, I think, 13 buildings, working out of our little trailer alongside the contractor and the developer in the field office at Carlyle. Cameron Station we had a lot less involvement with. Because the city manager at that time and bless her heart, because I enjoyed working with Viola, she declared that Alexandria was done. She renamed the Planning Department, used to be called the Department of Planning and Community Development when I came here and she renamed it the Department of Planning and Zoning, that all we needed to do was enforce zoning. Well, this was before the Army sold off the land to build Cameron Station, and it became a housing development. It was before the Railroad, Commonwealth Atlantic, sold off the land for Potomac Yard and it became a huge mixed use traditional neighborhood development there. But she thought we were done. And she wouldn't let us participate in the planning for either Cameron Station or Potomac Yard. She would let us go to the meetings and sit in the back of the room and observe. And so the developer would hire their own planners and their own architects who led that process. And we had to do what I guess today I would call guerrilla planning. You know, those architects were quite good in both of those cases and were building what was becoming nationally prominent. Building off of Carlyle, building off of Seaside in Florida that Andre Stuard designed. And realizing that people wanted walkable communities and they were getting on an airplane and flying to Europe to experience what we had right here in Old Town. And so I was able to work pretty closely with the architects on Potomac Yard to do the initial layouts, was able to work with some of the residents in Del Rey, a couple of architects who at that time had been pushing for the Old Monroe Avenue Bridge to be torn down and re-envisioned and I was able to design and do the graphics and take through the Planning Commission a straightened Monroe Avenue Bridge. And this is way before your time, but you used to have, you'd drive down North Patrick Street and you went up a hill and you had to make a hard

left, blind left turn, to go over the huge number of railroad tracks there and then make a hard right turn and go down the hill to get on what today is Richmond Highway going to Arlington. I lived here for three years before I even knew that area was in Alexandria. It was so foreign that it looked like it was Arlington. And I remember one of Kathy and I's first experiences here in Alexandria was we were in a car in a pouring rain. And that bridge had stoplights at either end and a station wagon full of, they were people who didn't have a green card. [00:46:52][699.3]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:46:53] Mm hmm. How have you seen... [00:46:55][2.0]

**Al Cox:** [00:46:56] Ran into the back of us. Totaled our car on the Monroe Avenue Bridge. So, I had a personal stake in wanting to straighten that and make it safer. [00:47:02][6.3]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:47:03] Absolutely. [00:47:03][0.0]

**Al Cox:** [00:47:03] And a connection between the two parts of Alexandria instead of a division. [00:47:07][3.5]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:47:09] So how have you seen Alexandria and your neighborhood change since you've lived here? I imagine it must be enormous. [Al nods] Really? Could you could you elaborate on that a little bit more? [00:47:18][9.2]

**Al Cox:** [00:47:19] Well, as I had said, Kathy and I had lived in a very mixed income, mixed race neighborhood in downtown Dallas. We worked really hard in Dallas, got it, worked on the master plan, got it declared a historic district, worked with the large public utilities and the developers with Trammell Crow, with Lindorff, with a lot of big money that was in Dallas in the 1980s in order to make that happen. So, when we moved here and looked around at the state of Parker-Gray in the early nineties, late eighties and early nineties, we weren't afraid of that. But the realtors were shocked that we were looking at property there. And we had rented a couple of places when we first moved here and I was traveling back and forth to Charlottesville and to Italy, and Kathy was employed by the National Trust in D.C. We got a condo out in the West End by Landmark. And then when I got back, rented a couple of places here in Old Town to try and get a feel for what Old Town was like, where good properties were. I had, still have, my grandfather's old 1950 Ford pickup truck and trying to find a place in Old Town with a garage is next to impossible and even trying to find a place, I never could find a place in Del Rey with a garage that we could afford. And at that time and I'm not sure whether this is still the case or not, Del Rey was more expensive than Old Town because it was becoming really hot back in the early nineties. And we ended up finding a place on North Alfred Street, on an ad on the back of the Gazette from McInerney, and it was a foreclosure, we later found out. And the lady lost it while we were writing a contract, and so we had to chase the contract all over banks in New York. And you know, they bundle that stuff. Price went up \$27,000, but we ended up getting it. And not a single utility in the house worked. We ran out of pots and pans, catching the rainwater the first time it rained with water pouring in different places through the ceilings, from the roof. That was 120 year old roof that had never been replaced. The realtors said, "Oh, well, you don't want to live west of Washington Street." I thought, why not? Still walking distance to King Street, number of Washington Street, a number of different places. Why would we not want to do that? "Oh, you just don't want to do that." And they never would come out and say. And then after we moved in, ten years later or so, we got to know some of the realtors a lot better. And we were doing presentations as B.A.R. staff to realtors in the town. So, I got to know some of

them better and they would say, "Oh, you don't want to live west of Route one." I'd say, "why not?" "Oh, well, that's where the black people live. You don't want to live over there." So, okay, property values kept going up in the southeast quadrant and in other parts of Old Town. And then it was, "Oh, you don't want to live west of West Street." So obviously, as prices have gone up, neighborhoods have been gentrified. Equally, I believe the older generations that lived in that part of Alexandria in the mid 20th century passed away, or they got to be retirement age and traded the old ramshackle two storey, 14 foot wide wood frame townhouse, sold it for enough money to buy a three bedroom brick rambler in Fort Washington or in D.C. And, you know, or they passed in their kids who didn't want to come back to Old Town and live in that old house that mom and dad lived in, sold it. And developers simply do what small developers do. They bought them up and flipped them. Some better than others. But there was such a demand that people moved in and rooming houses were converted back to single family, by and large. And that's what the Alexandria zoning ordinance encouraged, still does, in the RB zone. If you had a duplex, as Kathy and I have. It was a non-compliant use or non-conforming. And so, you know, if you went in to get a building permit, they would do everything they could to encourage you to go back to single family, which only raised the cost of the housing even more. So, from that standpoint, the neighborhood has changed a great deal. We're in the 300 block of North Alfred, so there are three African-American churches within a stone's throw of our house, one across the street and two others half block away. The attendance at those churches up till the pandemic three years ago, had always been quite good. But very few of the people actually still lived in Old Town. They were coming from D.C. or Maryland or someplace farther away. They weren't living in Alexandria anymore. So, parking was a challenge on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings. The stores, the African-American retail, especially the little strip on Queen Street between, what is it, Henry and Fayette, was dying. The theaters had closed years before. That had changed a great deal. In the northwest quadrant, the boom that took place in the early 1980s, '83, '84, after the opening of the King Street Metro had started around the metro, but it was really limited to that block facing the metro station. So there was an office project with some retail grade and the restaurants and the retail failed within ten years. Cole Croft was a little bit more successful. It was a combination of multifamily and townhomes with a bit of retail. Neighborhood service, dry cleaners and local retail, that survived and I think has done pretty well. But nothing else happened. I think the properties were gradually being acquired and the property owners were waiting for a developer to come along and offer them big money and they were surrounded by A.R.H.A public housing. And that was depressing. The property values there, A.R.H.A was not maintaining their properties. So, you know, it had kind of a bad reputation. It had a statistically bad reputation on the police logs for being the highest crime area in the city. And that held development back. But then once A.R.H.A began doing redevelopment, they did James Bland, Ramsey Homes, now they're doing Samuel Madden. The neighborhood changed a great deal. And even before James Bland was finished, the old 7-Eleven that had formerly made most of its money, I think selling lottery tickets and malt liquor quarts, was sold and converted to a church. So, that part of the neighborhood changed a lot. Our car stopped, it had been broken into two or three times being parked in the alley and other people's being parked on the street. A headwind has broken out. They were stealing things like our tax paid sticker off the windshield. You know, it was the reason they were breaking a window and causing hundreds of dollars worth of property damage. That stopped right after James Bland. The police sirens, the gunshots that we used to hear on Friday and Saturday nights, almost every weekend at the end of Alfred Street stopped. And yet the same number of people living in A.R.H.A subsidized housing live there today that lived there before. There's just four times the number of people that used to live there before in market rate townhomes. So the mixed income model to a large degree worked. Scale of the buildings, you know, I think they're a

little big. They're not nearly as big as some of what's, you know, currently being built. I think Samuel Madden will be one of the most atrocious large buildings in the historic district since urban renewal. But that's the model that politics is leading us right now. So, from all of those perspectives, I think the neighborhood has changed. And as a property owner who's lived in that house for 30 years, I think it's a good change. [00:57:02][582.8]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:57:03] So did you work on the James Bland and Ramsey homes in conjunction with the developers? [00:57:08][4.5]

**Al Cox:** [00:57:10] The beginning of James Bland, when that was going through the entitlement process was when I was still in Code administration, but I moved at the request of the planning director and the Board of Architectural Review chair. They pushed and pushed for a year to try and get me to go back to the planning office to staff the B.A.R, because that's where my heart was and that's where my training was. And so I did. And I'm very, very happy that I did. So, through the construction of the later phases of James Pland, I was a part of that. Through all of the Ramsey Homes redevelopment, I was very much involved. And I was gone by the time they started this Samuel Madden redevelopment. I had retired three years ago. [00:58:03][52.6]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:58:05] So, I'm trying to get at that because we discussed in our previous meeting about, you know, the difference between materially historic architecture and culturally historic architecture. So James Bland, of course, like this public housing probably materially is not as important historically, but it might be culturally. [00:58:22][17.5]

**Al Cox:** [00:58:23] That's a very good point. [00:58:23][0.0]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:58:23] Could you talk about that difference? How to navigate that difference, I guess, in your field or in Alexandria? [00:58:30][7.0]

**Al Cox:** [00:58:32] Um, it is challenging with some of those older buildings. There was a push to build affordable housing in Old Town because that was considered downtown Alexandria in the forties, mostly post-World War Two, but a little bit of during World War Two. Ramsey Homes, for instance, was defense housing for African-American workers at Torpedo Factory and some other places. So, those were the period they were built. And those row houses, the red brick row houses that were built, had slate roofs, they were solid construction. They were two stories, 800 square feet or so, two bedroom, one bath, small units. But they were exactly like the ones that you had being built west of West Street, on Washington Street, at both ends of Washington Street, South Columbus, South Alfred for government workers, they were not all that different from what was being built in Yates Gardens. They just weren't maintained. And nobody, because they weren't individually owned, was doing additions on the rear or on the back. Nobody was keeping them up. So they were allowed, purposely allowed to deteriorate. Unfortunately, HUD wasn't giving out money in the late 20th century to do maintenance kind of activities, and they were switching to other programs like Section Eight and other things to try and do dispersed subsidized housing. So, you're right. The buildings themselves weren't architecturally significant in that they didn't have the detailing, they were at the beginning of the era of industrialized mass production of windows and doors and roof materials and things like that. Culturally, they had become significant because you had families, whole generations of families, who had lived there. And that wasn't the original intention. It was supposed to be short term, get you back on your feet or housing for grandmother

when she didn't have a means of income after she had retired. And it became a lot more than that. But nevertheless, a neighborhood was built up. The A.R.H.A model was always, "Oh, we're going to find temporary housing for people, build a new project and move the people back in." That has not been my observed experience. Three years later, those people are dispersed, they're gone. The neighborhoods broken up. They're not necessarily the ones moving back in. And what they're moving back into is not the same neighborhood. The former developments, for better or worse, had huge yards. They had mature trees. You could sit out in the backyard and they had swing sets and barbecue grills, and you could create community in the backyards of these townhomes. They were huge. They were much bigger yards than the people that lived in the fashionable southeast quadrant had. Much larger trees, and the scale of the dwellings wasn't overwhelming. You didn't have a five story building next door to you. That's gone. Every single one of the new developments is cramming as many dwelling units as humanly possible, going beyond the existing zoning and the existing height, overruling the B.A.R. in every case, in order to produce housing for whatever reason. So, you don't have open space anymore. You don't have a place where kids can ride bicycles or fenced yards, where you can watch your kids play outside while you're cooking dinner. They're upstairs. And I had the former president of A.R.H.A tell me, "Oh, that's not a problem, but we need to be able to get couches in these living rooms. So make sure you make the doors big enough. And we want space for big screen TVs, because what kids do today is play video games. They don't play outside." And that's the housing model. And I don't think that's good for community. I don't think it's good for the people that live there. And I don't think it's good for the neighborhood. But that's the track we're on right now. So that has changed. And I don't, I mean, I don't begrudge anybody good housing. They needed to maintain what they had. But, you know, the houses being built today are far more luxurious than the houses of the historic district. A block away. Anyway. Sorry. What was your question again? [Al laughs] [01:03:33][301.3]

**Kerry James Reed:** [01:03:35] [Laughs] No, it's fine. We were, I just thought. [01:03:37][1.2]

**Al Cox:** [01:03:37] I have strong personal feelings, as you can tell, about some of these things. [laughs] [01:03:41][3.7]

**Kerry James Reed:** [01:03:41] This has been absolutely fantastic. I just have a couple more questions. So, you know, when we talk about, when you've been talking about historic preservation architecture in the context of these new developments, you mentioned community a lot. [01:03:56][15.2]

**Al Cox:** [01:03:57] Right. [01:03:57][0.0]

**Kerry James Reed:** [01:03:57] So how do you see these developments affecting the community that you have lived in personally? [01:04:03][6.2]

**Al Cox:** [01:04:05] Well, your question raises something for me that's the reason I went back to graduate school. What my partner and I in Dallas had been doing was restoring individual buildings, often surrounded in downtown Dallas by parking lots. You can spend all the time and many you want restoring an individual building. But if it isn't an integrated part of the community, I was practicing in Dallas long enough to watch buildings that I had restored be torn down ten years later. And that's pretty disheartening. So, yes, community matters. You know, it's different if you're talking about a plantation home like Monticello or Mount Vernon. But for an urban community, the



scale, the settings, the context, that matters to those people. Now, you can't preserve those kinds of things frozen, you know, in ice, because Chinatown in D.C. is really not Chinatown anymore. The Chinese have all moved away, and Little Italy in Boston is not really Little Italy anymore because they all blended with the middle class and moved away. And for the same reasons that a lot of the African-American elders moved from Parker-Gray and Uptown. Communities evolve. They are living, breathing things. They're not frozen in time. And I don't think they should be. And I think that was one of the lessons we tried to educate the B.A.R about in the last 30 years. How this has changed, we had a resident of Parker-Gray who was, let's say he was libertarian. To be politically correct. Certainly was Tea Party, absolutely thought the historic district was communist and didn't comply with the U.S. Constitution. But he very correctly said, "I've never had a tour bus go down my alley. What difference does it make what the back windows are made of on the back of my house." He's absolutely right. So we tried to make those things more user friendly. The buildings need to evolve along with the community. At the same time, you don't want to lose that visual and tactile sense of the craftsmanship. Because our homes, unlike in Montgomery County, where you're looking at farmhouses, sit 200 yards back from the road, you can touch and feel all of the townhomes in Old Town. 1752 Ordinance said the houses had to be built up to the street because they were trying to recreate Society Hill and Philadelphia. We weren't Williamsburg. So, I think that the setting in the architecture matters. At the same time, one of the things that I think the B.A.R Was guilty of 30 years ago was trying to create Williamsburg and to be a little bit derogatory Disneyland. And you don't want to fool a tourist or somebody who isn't a trained historian or architect that this house is the same age as this house when this one was built 250 years later. There were several buildings in Old Town where they really wanted, the owner, the applicant, really wanted a building that looked authentically like an 18th century building. The board made them put a cornerstone on it that said, this building's built in 1995, so that at least you had some record walking down the sidewalk to know how old the building was. So, there's no requirement in our B.A.R design guidelines. And the secretary of the interior's national standards say there should be a difference in the new buildings. However, I've been much more comfortable with and our B.A.R has traditionally mandated that buildings be subtly different. That a Frank Gehry titanium building that looks like it wanted a piece of paper would not be appropriate on Washington Street. You know, context is everything. So, you can use historic materials, you can use punched windows in what appears to be a masonry load bearing building, but have very contemporary details so that if you stand back and look at it, you know, oh, that building looks like it's maybe 30 years old, not 275 years old. When we were doing the waterfront projects, the chair of our B.A.R very perceptively said, "Buildings in Old Town should be classic, not classical. They should be of all time, not of their own time." Because that's the term of art that the Secretary of Standards uses, is that new buildings should be of their own time. Well, what that was doing was giving license to every young architect with a Howard Roark ego to try and do their masterpiece and scream, "Look at me," on South Lee Street. You don't come to a historic district from Ohio to see the latest ego project of a D.C. architect in the middle of the historic district. You come to see the historic district and its setting and context. But nevertheless, it's a ongoing and constant fight. So, that's sort of one of the problems of most modern architectural education. And I say that having been a past president of the A.I.A. [01:10:05][360.4]

**Kerry James Reed:** [01:10:09] So, we've been going for a while now. I just have some closing questions. But first, is there anything that we haven't discussed yet that you think we should talk about? [01:10:22][12.9]

**Al Cox:** [01:10:23] Well, going off of your last question, I think the recent projects on the Waterfront are a very, very good example of modern buildings in a historic context. At the edge of the historic district, sitting on the river like the Patent and Trademark Office, we put small three story townhouses, same height or lower than the 1980s townhouses across the street on Union St. We put those facing the historic district, masonry buildings with punched windows. As you got toward the water and faced Maryland in the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, it's bigger glassier buildings that have the views of the water and the views of Maryland. I think that kind of detail, and I strongly compliment Shalom Baroness Architects for having that sensitivity and that design and working with staff and the B.A.R over 12 or 13 B.A.R meetings and work sessions to create that project. I think that was extremely successful. I think that the Indigo Hotel, again, had a very, very good architect and a very good owner who was listening and was sensitive. That was the first project built east of Union Street as part of the waterfront plan, and the citizens were still a little bit more sensitive. That one was a little more what our board calls "Phony Colony," was trying to look like a historic pastiche pasted on a modern building, not quite as successful. The board was a lot more comfortable by the time we did Robinson Landing a couple of years later, and I think the Old Dominion Boat Club, it was in fact voted by the citizens of Alexandria during one of our symposiums as being one of the, well it was voted the best contemporary building to be built in Alexandria in the last ten years because it fit its context. It looked like one of the old waterfront warehouses, but it was a modern use and it was a recollection of the industrial waterfront. That was why Alexandria was settled here. So, that I think the Waterfront, Potomac Yard, Carlyle, some of Cameron Station. I think those were large projects that in their own setting were all successful in their own way. We just opened up the new Potomac Yard metro station. Our Board of Architectural Review had significant input in the design of that on the parkway side, because it was facing the parkway. And they made the conscious decision and I was very happy to work with them, that building should look like a building that was of the park and not a phony colony brick building that was plopped in the middle of the parkway. And I think that was a brilliant design. It didn't quite get executed as we hoped. It was all supposed to be brown so that the brown mullions and structural elements of that station building blended into the trees. And because it was design-built, and because of the pandemic, some of that didn't get down to the people ordering some of those materials. And some of that came back white instead of brown. And it sticks out a little more than it was supposed to. So without ending on a sour note, I mean, it's a lot of work and it's constant work. And I look forward to the next generation picking up, and I look forward to seeing where that goes. [01:14:21][238.7]

**Kerry James Reed:** [01:14:22] Speaking of the next generation, what do you hope for the future of your discipline? [01:14:27][4.6]

**Al Cox:** [01:14:30] Because of the absolute need for sustainability during climate change and because buildings are a huge contributor to that. Adaptive use of older buildings is going to be one of the leading things we have to do. And our board, our Board of Architectural Review, is fairly practiced at that. And I believe that we can be a national leader in that. Unfortunately, the last few projects that have been done and I think Annie B Rose, the next A.R.H.A project is not doing this. And I think unfortunately some of the projects in Old Town North are not focusing on this. There is embodied energy in existing materials. It requires so much energy to fire brick or to make concrete or to make reinforcing steel. And that's an activity that takes place a long distance away and is shipped here. So you have transportation costs. If you do things locally, you use local labor, it's things that can't be offshored. You use existing materials and you, you know, it's part of this office

building to housing conversion right now that I think we can be a leader in doing that without tearing the building down and building up spec built ugly apartment buildings that look like you're in Clarendon. You can reuse some of these old buildings that are in Old Town. So I think that's something that I hope that we can do. And like we were a national leader in historic preservation for 50 years. I think we can do that in housing and sustainability as well. [01:16:24][113.8]

**Kerry James Reed:** [01:16:26] And lastly, if there is one memory that you could hold on to forever, what would it be? [01:16:30][4.6]

**Al Cox:** [01:16:31] Of all of the terrific people I've met since I moved here. As I said at one of my retirement parties, Kathy and I moved here because of the old buildings. We stayed here because of the people. Really nice people that took a couple of kids from Texas and embraced them and introduced us to people who showed us how things worked and made us feel comfortable here. And I think that's probably the best memory. [01:17:00][28.6]

**Kerry James Reed:** [01:17:01] All right. Well, thank you so much Al. This has been an absolute pleasure. [01:17:04][3.2]

**Al Cox:** [01:17:04] You're very welcome, Kerry. Thank you.