Oral History Interview

with

Alison Guinness

by Laura Heath and Morgan Hamill

Russell Library, Middletown, Connecticut

December 22, 2009
General Topic of Interview: The history of the brownstone quarries and their continued role in the shaping of the Portland community.

Narrator: Alison Guinness
Interviewers: Laura Heath and Morgan Hamill
Dates: October 16, 2009, and November 20, 2009
Place: Russell Library, Middletown, Connecticut

Biography:

Alison Guinness became a student in Wesleyan University’s Graduate Liberal Studies Program in 1983. She began by studying French and English, but took some classes in the Earth & Environmental Science department. Professor Jelle de Boer received a grant from the Rockfall Foundation to study the geological resources of Connecticut, and asked her to do the part of the project on the Portland brownstone quarries. Since then, she has continued to study a variety of topics relating to the use of natural resources. At the time of these interviews, she is an archaeologist for a Cultural Resource Management firm and continues to study and educate people about the brownstone quarries.

Interviewers’ Comments:

Alison Guinness has been instrumental in shaping the way we understand the Portland brownstone quarries. Her roles as a researcher, educator, and activist for preservation have helped the Portland community understand its history and resources. In the interviews, she tells stories about the history of the quarries and of her own relationship with them and with the Portland community. She asks us to pass the stories along.
I was part of the GLSP program and I started that in 1983, I think, and I was originally a French and English major. But when I came to Wesleyan I started out with a class on Japan, because we had had a Japanese exchange student stay with us one summer, and there was an interesting course being taught by Dave Titus that I took, and it was such a great class that I decided to continue in the program, and started taking some other interesting sounding classes. Some of them were in geology, and eventually I ended up doing several classes in the Earth and Environmental Science program. Jelle de Boer asked me if I would write the Brownstone Quarries research paper that was part of a grant that he had obtained from the Rockfall Foundation here in Middletown, to study some of the important quarry sites. That's how I got involved. And at the Rockfall Symposium, I think that was 1987—the fall of 1987—we had our paper and project on exhibit at that symposium. It was presented there, right in front of the dinosaur tracks in the hall of the Science Center.

The story of the brownstone quarries is very interdisciplinary: you have geology, and within the geology area you have dinosaur tracks and interesting prehistoric reptiles—that is always a good tease for any research project. You had various aspects of the development of the town, the industry itself and how it developed various quarrying practices and the evolution of the industry from primitive ways of extracting stone to the more intricate, highly-industrialized methods at the end of 19th century. You had the story of the people, many of them were immigrants, some from Ireland, some from Sweden, as well as people who lived in the surrounding area who are of English descent. You also had some Cornish people who were quarrying there. So you had this interesting mosaic of ethnicities that was involved.

Within those ethnicities you had a certain amount of, um, social stresses, because the Irish who came to work there were Catholics, and the existing people here were of Puritan extraction, basically Anglican or Congregational; and you also had the fact that the Irish spoke with thick brogues and it was difficult for the existing townspeople to understand them, so you get that tension growing over the years of quarrying. You have aspects of the labor movement that develop over the course of time—if you think the economy is bad now, you should study some of the major depressions of the 19th century; the defected, the labor force, quarrying, uh, the amount of money made, how much people were paid. You also had that social structure within the quarry itself and what quarry owners did to command respect and power over the quarry labor force.

And then you have the actual use of the stone, which is architecture, and the development of stylistics over time, reflected in the various ways that people viewed architecture and the part of the social structure, 'cause you're—the reason for the popularity of brownstone was the fact that it fit in so well with the romantic ideas of, uh, earth and earth-tones, and that sort of thing. And as that goes away, you see the decline of the industry. So, there are all those various things wrapped up in the story.

So, it's far from just a dull pile of rocks—you have all these different aspects to it, to, to look into. And, you know, where it was used: who wanted it, why did they want it, and that aspect of it as well. So, it's a very interesting story. And sandstone has uses that go way back in time, and, so that makes it interesting too, that it's not just a static use.
I think it [the project] may have started in '85...I can't remember anymore, it's been so long. And, the project had to be done for Rockfall in a certain amount of time. It was a very short span of time that the initial work was done.

I knew that I had to start with the geology. And the historical information and particularly any photographs that were extant showing the quarrying process, and that sort of thing. I went to the library and you start digging, and then you start to collect the information which leads to questions. And from those questions you branch out like a web to collect all the information. And you hear a story about this person, and you follow that story.

I started out at the Portland Library, where at that time the Historical Society had a little room with an exhibit, and most of the, the history of the quarries were kept in the library. And, unfortunately, when I got there, somebody had already been there before me and had absconded with a great deal of what material they had, so, I went through whatever they had left. And then I gradually found out different sources; um, Jack Dillon was a source for me, I interviewed him and I looked at his materials. I heard about different people who had done things or who were related to what was going on, and I would call them, talk to them, and interview them, or look at whatever materials they had. I went around to cemeteries to look at carving styles. I got involved with, gravestone people, and did some tours around cemeteries with them, talking about various carvers, and the time period of the use of brownstone. And looked into the architectural history of the country, and how the stone was being used, what styles were being used, the evolution of the style over time, and, um, the rise and fall of its use, and what were the reasons for that happening. And looked into labor history, into Irish history, the history of Catholicism in Connecticut. There were all kinds of things.

The labor movement...um, in the earliest days of quarrying, labor was local and it grew from the resident population. But as industry evolved and there were less and less local people available, quarry owners had to look elsewhere. Because they were evolving into a big industry and they needed a lot more workers. So they would use labor brokers, who would be able to find them people to come here to work in the quarries. And the earliest ones were the Irish. In the, um, early nineteenth century the Irish were coming to America because of the conditions in Ireland. If you're not aware of what was happening in Ireland, I can give you a little background on that. The English government was very harsh to the Irish population, because, for...the biggest reason was because they were still Catholic. And they encouraged the creation of plantations, which is how America was populated, by creating English plantations. And so Englishmen moved to Ireland and began these plantations and began to take over the countryside, and take over the Irish and make them, well, not even second-class citizens. And over time they developed these laws that did not allow the Irish to own property, to practice their religion, to go to school and a number of other things. So the Irish began coming to America early in the nineteenth century, so by 1834, there were already Irishmen working in the quarries. And during expansion of the industry— and also the great famine that occurred in the 1840s— a lot of Irish came to America looking for a better life. So there were thousands of Irish coming to America at that time. So the labor brokers found a number of Irishmen to add to who was already here. And if you had...there were a lot of family connections, and friend connections, and the Irish told their friends and family, “come here to work, there's work available in the quarries.” So, over time, a large number of Irish came to Portland to work in the quarries. So you had English, Cornish, Scots, and Irish for a goodly amount of the nineteenth century working in the quarries. And up to...between a quarter and a third of the labor force was Irish.
And in the 1870s, um, in the early, I think it was in 1871, that the Irish struck for higher wages. They were; they weren't technically unionized. I, I don't think they ever were. But they could get together and say that they were gonna strike, and not go to work, for particular days or reasons or whatever. And they took off their holidays, too. Their Catholic holidays, they took those off. And there were other times when they were off: when the circus came to town, everybody was off to go to the circus. So the quarry owners, again, went to New York City looking for immigrant labor and they brought the Scots— uh, not the Scots— the Swedes to Portland to work in the quarries. So then you had an influx of a lot of Swedish people into Portland. So the labor force was primarily the, the English, Irish, Scots, and the Swedes. Uh, there's been, always been a lot of talk about the Italians and their role in the construction industry and, and quarrying. But they did not come until the late nineteenth century. By the time they arrived the quarrying industry in Portland is on the decline— so there may have been a handful of Italians working there. And then by the beginning of the twentieth century the quarries are basically not even functioning; so little was going on there. And over the course of time, the quarry owners had a number of rules and regulations and operating procedures that they used in the operation of the quarries. They only wanted men of good character, and somehow or other they managed to figure out who was of good character; I don't know how they did that, there's nothing in the record of that. However we know that the Irish have a reputation for, um, a problem with sobriety, but, occasionally one or two of them, I guess, would not go to work because of intoxication, but there's not too much record for that either.

[When the Irish struck] They needed to fill the, the gap in their labor force, and the Swedes fit in very well, even though they probably spoke English with a, a strong accent, but they were Protestants. So they already had something going for them when they got here, is that they were Protestants and not Catholics. 'Cause there was still a great deal of, uh, tension between, um, the Protestant population in Connecticut and Catholics. Um, if you know anything about the history of Connecticut, um...during the Revolutionary War there were a number of Irish Patriots that fought on the side of the Revolution. And a lot was going on here in Connecticut and the New England area in the early days of the Revolutionary War. And George Washington passed through Connecticut many times, and he told the, um, the government of Connecticut that they had to get used to the idea that there were gonna be Catholics and Irish fighting in the Revolution. And that was the beginning of Connecticut finally getting the idea that there had to be some kind of equality as far as religion was concerned. But there was still a lot of latent tension by the time you've got the quarrying going on. So it's still there. And if you talk to some of the older people in town, they might tell you that this lasted into the twentieth century.

Over the course of time, though, [the Irish] built themselves a church in Middletown, in 1852—St. John's— at the head of Main Street; it was one of the first Irish churches in the state of Connecticut. And, um, the Irish worshiped there for a number of years, and had their own cemetery behind the church. And if you look at the gravestones in that cemetery, you will see that they are distinctly different from any of the early New England cemeteries in Connecticut. One across the street, the oldest one in Middletown, the, uh, Riverview Cemetery— or Riverside, it's, it's either Riverview or Riverside. There are the same cemeteries in every town and they have those names, and I, you know, in my town it's either Riverview or Riverside, you know, and the opposite here. So, anyway, um, the Irish has a distinctive, um, carving style that they used for their gravestones, which is very different from the English. They're more Gothic style in nature, uh, shaped like big arches from Cathedrals, with, um, the, um, various trefoil forms in
them sometimes, and, um, that general shape. More pointed than you would see in some of the uh early gravestones in the old cemeteries. Uh, they had, um, they could get credit at the stores. Some of the Irish who came, who didn't work on the quarries, established stores that were populated by the, um, Irish population who worked in the quarries. So gradually over time the Irish became, um, assimilated and became a part of the community and today you'll probably find more Irish names in Portland than you will English names.

There was a traditional view that was told to me, that the quarry, the Irish quarry workers in particular would collect their pay in the fall when the, they closed for the winter, and then they would go home to Ireland. Well, that, they really didn't do that. They stayed here and they probably did odd jobs over the winter, and some of them did work at the quarries: there was a winter work crew and there was a summer work crew that was larger. So, um, the story that they all left, I, I don't think is accurate. For one thing, it's one heck of a voyage over the north Atlantic in the wintertime. And I don't think that they would do that. And they became more established here, and if you look at the census records, they're, they're all here. They don't really seem to be going anywhere. And there was, um, an early, um, population of Irish in the northern part of, north Middletown area. You know, in the very early days; so there was already an established Irish community here.

The quarrying season ran from April to whenever the river froze and they couldn't ship. So the largest, the bulk of the labor force was from April until then, and over the winter there were still a number of people who were employed but much less than during the regular quarrying season. And you worked from sunup to sundown. So in the early Spring your days were shorter, as you got into summer the days expanded, and then towards the fall you had a decline of work hours. So you could work a pretty long day in the middle of the summer. And, um, as you moved through the season, too, your midday break expanded. So in April your midday break was an hour and then by full summer it was two hours. They also didn't work when there was rain or snow. If it was too hot or too cold, they didn't work. They broke for funerals that were going to the cemetery that I told you about the last time. So they would allow the funeral to take place and then they would go back to work, 'cause it was pretty noisy, operating in the quarries.

You, you don't find any references to owing your soul to the company store, like the song, but you definitely owed just about everybody in town by the end of the season. You owed the doctor, you owed the mercantile, you owed whoever you had borrowed from. And they would also ask for advances on their pay, too.

And wages varied depending on who you were. There were some salaried employees, primarily the English who owned and operated or who had higher ranking positions within the quarry. Regular day laborers were paid by the day; there were some people who were paid by the month. But looking over the records, you actually made more money if you worked by the day rather than by the month. And by the early 1870s most of the workers were making about $2.50 a day, which by labor standards in the U.S. was a pretty good wage. In 1873 there was a major, uh, recession, and a lot of the workers were laid off and pay dropped to a dollar a day and it never went back up again. So that was pretty much the, the high point in wages for labor. Although, after that period of time was actually the peak of the production. So, labor was very much affected by what was going on with the economy, even though the quarry— the industry— was running pretty well.

During the, the operation of the quarries, when they wanted to do some blasting, they would do that during times when the men were out of the quarry, always. So they might do that
at lunchtime, during break or they might do it over the weekend when there was nobody there. But they did work a six day week. And they were off on Sunday. And there were various, uh, activities going on within the quarry. So you would have men who were actually removing stone from the quarry face; you would have men who were in another area who would be rough dressing the stone; and then they would move it out to the wharf where it would be loaded onto ships and before the advent of the Connecticut Steam Brownstone Company in 1884 it would go elsewhere to be dressed, unless it went to a local mason who did his own work.

In the early days of quarrying, they would, um, move the stone and bury it for a period of time, so that it would age. And they called that scrapping. And that would allow the moisture to get out of the stone, because if you trap the moisture inside, that, uh, encouraged the disintegration of the stone. So you wanted it to dry out. And later on they found that they didn't have to bury it, so they could just stack it in various places and let it dry out. It was easier to work when it was wet and soft, than it was when it was dried out, but it didn't disintegrate as much as it...you would let it age. Some of the stone went to New York City and was used by speculators and they didn't want to wait for the stone, they wanted it fast, so they would get it quickly and un-scrappled, and then they...when it would go up it would begin to disintegrate almost immediately.

Quarry workers lived in various areas of town around the quarries. There was one site, uh, down in the area under what is now the Arrigoni Bridge, which had a lot of quarry housing in that area. And there was some up on the upper level, above the quarries and various places along Main Street, where quarry workers lived. They were provided housing by the quarries, and they would pay for it at the end of the season when they would get paid. And if they, uh, had accumulated a lot of debt over the course of the quarry season, they might not get any money at the end of the season, when they got paid. Some of the quarry workers were literate, some were not; they had a form that they signed off on at the beginning of the quarry season, and a lot of them put an X for their name on there. I don't recall any particular distribution of literacy between the different ethnic groups that worked there.

There are probably other things that I could tell you that I can't think of off the top of my head. One of the stories was about, um, Dr. Barrett. Dr. Barrett was supposed to have been a geologist from England who came here and didn't do geology—actually he was a medical doctor, he came here and didn't do medicine. He got involved in collecting fossils and minerals because this was a very well-known area for its mineral deposits and people would come from all over the place to collect. And so Dr. Barrett collected fossils and he acquired quite a collection and people knew about his collection, and he was also a very well-known botanist. And he was written up in several journals and wrote articles in some very early botanical journals in the United States. So, he was buried in the Indian Hill cemetery here in Middletown and someone told me that I should go see his grave marker. So I went to the cemetery, drove all around, couldn't find the thing, and finally stopped to ask somebody and they took me to Dr. Barrett's stone. It is one of the most interesting gravestones you will ever find. The front of it is a big slab of brownstone, and on one side, the side... the west-facing side, they carved all his pertinent information: his name, where he came from, and he was a botanist and a geologist, and that sort of thing. On the back side, it's completely covered with dinosaur tracks. And the big chunk of stone that holds that slab up has two fossil tree trunks, and in between the two tree trunks they carved “The Testimony of the Rocks,” which was one of the first geologic papers ever written. So here was this fantastic gravestone: it had dinosaur tracks on it; it had this interesting man who
was related to what was going on. So, you have these unique stories and connections, and for a person doing research like that, it's one of those eureka moments that you look for.

The most surprising thing about this is the extent to which it keeps morphing. One of the most interesting structures that was built out of Portland brownstone was a building in San Francisco. And it was the mansion home of James Flood. Which is interesting in itself because there were Floods in Portland, not related to this Flood. James Flood was one of the partners in the Comstock Lode, in Nevada. I don't know if you're familiar with that, but it was a huge silver strike, and it made them wealthy beyond their dreams. And James Flood visited the east to see how the wealthy lived here, and he went to New York City, where on the main avenues were brownstone mansions and on the numbered streets were brownstone row-houses, and he met with wealthy people and he decided that he wanted one of those brownstone mansions for himself, in San Francisco. So he contracted with the Middlesex quarry to provide the stone; it took them two years to quarry enough stone for this building. Some of the blocks were thirteen feet long and twenty-two inches square; it had to be loaded on ships here, hauled down the Connecticut River, into Long Island Sound, to New York—there were a lot of stone yards on the east coast of Manhattan and on the west coast of Brooklyn—and they would offload the stone and put them on ships that were bound for other ports. So this stone had to be loaded on to ships that were bound for San Francisco—before the Panama Canal, which meant they had to all go around Cape Horn, which is a miracle in itself, and get to San Francisco. So, this building stood on Nob Hill, in San Francisco, from about 1884 until the great earthquake in 1906. It was the only mansion to survive the earthquake and fire. It was gutted, but because it was made out of stone, it survived. So after the fire, it was purchased by the Pacific Club and the Union Club. They were two private men's clubs in San Francisco who joined together to buy the building...or, the site, actually, they were going to, uh, take the building down and do something else, but the earthquake came along, and that changed their minds, and depression, and all kinds of other things, so they just renovated the building. And that story in itself is very interesting and unique, and I had the opportunity to go to San Francisco and go to the historical collections at the library and see that there were, after the earthquake, a little tent city next to that building that came from here. When everything else was gone.

I'm originally from Baltimore, Maryland, which I came to find out has a great deal of brownstone itself. And I was hoping during this research to find out that the Smithsonian was built of Portland stone, but it's not, it's made of Maryland stone. And after that I would go down to visit my aunt in Baltimore and she and I would go out cruising around Baltimore looking for old brownstone buildings. So, uh, I have some pictures of buildings there. And then, you know, gradually everywhere you would look.

I learned of a, a building that survived the Civil War, down in one of the Carolinas, I think it's in Charleston. And it was a bank. And it was made out of Portland brownstone! And it even had a cannonball lodged in one of the walls that had come through the building, but still survived, and had been renovated at the time that I was doing the original research for this project. So I contacted them, not only to find out about the building, but the restoration process.

Brownstone restoration has become a very important industry in itself, and preserving the stone, and, um, various techniques that have developed over the last forty years or so, to preserve those particular buildings. And, um, some unique methods for either filling in places that have rotted away and disappeared or replacing them. And Wesleyan had a major project done on the
'92 Theater one year, and the chapel had some work done on it. But the '92 Theater had some major restoration work done on it.

They chose one of the best companies I know of to do that work. Which is also the same company that did the, um, restoration of the Old State House in Hartford. And this is before Mike opened his quarry so there was no replacement stone available. They were going to, uh, Germany to get replacement stone. So instead of doing replacement stone, they did a process called Jahn which is, basically, creating a brown cement to do the patching, and then by having very skillful artisans do that work; it looks very much like stone rather than just patching material. So, um, they’re… they do a very good job. I’ve seen some not-so-good jobs, too. Over the course of time, people have, um, done patching with material that wasn’t, um, either good quality or the color didn’t match, and on some buildings, you could look at them and see this patchwork. It looked like a crazy quilt of patching. And different colors and different textures of medium and things like that. And stone preservation has become such an important thing in the late twentieth century, that, uh, there are now preservation, um, programs offered where you can get degrees in architectural preservation.

There you have the old quarries that were used for several hundred years right next to an actual working quarry, where people can see the quarrying process. And Mike still does some of the same things they did a hundred years ago that haven’t changed any as well as the new processes that are being used, all right there in the same area. So it’s, uh, it’s a boon for anything the town can do if they decided that that’s something they wanted to highlight about the town. And, um, have people actually see what goes on in a quarry. And a lot of it is still back-breaking, labor-intensive work.

People are always looking for the cheapest product, but to actually replace something with it’s original, the original item that was put there two or three hundred years ago is a pretty amazing thing to do. You can’t do that with very many things. So to have that long line, continuous line of production is a rare thing. Especially when you can say that there aren’t many quarries in operation.

Every time I would do a program on this for some group in the local area, people would come up to me and they would add stories to it. You know, they would see a slide I would show and they would come and say, "I think that might have been so and so.” So, you, you get more information the more you're out there, the more you get back because people recognize things and they add to the history. And when we did a show on that at the Connecticut River Museum, people knew we were doing that and we made an ad saying that we were doing this exhibit, and if you had any information or your family members worked there, please contact us. And so we got more people involved, who brought us their histories, their family photographs, and things like that, and allowed us to borrow those pieces of memorabilia for the exhibit. And then when the exhibit opened, then more people would see it, and they would keep adding to the information.

There was a lady up in Wethersfield, whose family had been involved in the quarries, whom I went up to visit a couple of times. And, they loaned us one of their family member's toolboxes, that contained all the tools that this quarryman had used over his lifetime of working in the quarries, working on the stone. And whenever you have material culture like that, that connects you to a real human being, it brings the story to life. So that was very cool.

I came to understand the importance of that site, and that's why I kept badgering the town about acquiring it whenever it became possible, because I knew of its importance and its value to the country. Um, not all the brownstone in New York City came from Portland—some of it came
from New Jersey and possibly from Pennsylvania—but a good deal of it came from Connecticut, and came to represent a building—brownstone—and even after brownstone wasn't used in that particular style of construction, they were still called brownstones. So, it was a very powerful story, that was sort of languishing down there by the Connecticut River in the bushes, and, um, people in Portland didn't know where it was or the story behind it. So gradually over time, I would be in town enough times and hanging out and doing different things, that, uh, they gradually became aware of what they had.

I think that the water park is a good use for the site. It utilizes, uh, the facility for some important work. They teach underwater diving and that’s a big thing now in underwater archaeology, so that’s where people can go and learn how to do that kind of work, which we don’t do very much of here in Connecticut. Uh, underwater archaeology is becoming a more and more utilized discipline within the archaeological community these days. So that’s a good thing, people can go there and have fun and enjoy themselves, and, and see an important historic site. And it’s utilized and, um, it brings more awareness to the quarries and the history and what’s there. They cleaned all the terrible overgrowth that was all around the site, so you can see more of some of the, the structures that were utilized in the quarrying process around the quarries. And it gets people down there. And I’m glad that they have done that.

I don’t know there’s a better way to use the quarries. About twenty years ago, someone, someone, a development company had purchased the quarries and the surrounding land and were planning to put in condos on the upper area near where Mike is quarrying and they were going to make a canal from the river into the quarry just below where Mike is working and they were gonna have a big marina in there. And there was, uh, quite a bit of controversy about that. And, uh, that was not a use that I felt was good. And there were some environmental concerns about that, and, um, even some people who wondered if it was possible to connect the quarries and the river and how that hydrologic dynamic would work out. And that was, that was when the economy tanked and they went into foreclosure and the bank obtained the quarries, and that’s when I kept telling the town, “This is the time to get the quarries. You won’t get a chance like this again!” So that’s when they went through the process of acquiring the quarries and, uh, some other land in that area.

The development company went out of business, which meant that all of their holdings went into foreclosure because they couldn’t pay the banks and the bank holding company was contacted and I believe it was in Florida. It wasn’t an easy process. And then the town had to contact the bank and work out a purchase agreement with the bank to acquire that. Then the town has to go through the process of coming up with the money and the approval of the townspeople to appropriate that money or bond it out, or however they plan to pay for it, in order to do that. So it was a, a process that they had to go through, in convincing everyone in town that it was a good idea, and that we should do this and the amount of money put forth to do that. They, uh, had a number of meetings, town meetings, to discuss the project and, um, various people would come and talk about it, and things like that.

For a while, most people were ignorant of it. Um, I think that my continued work and showing up in Portland, periodically, keeps it in the forefront, and since the, uh, creation of the Brownstone Quorum, a group of Portland people who are interested in, in what’s going on related to the quarries, it’s more in, in the public eye, and it could be better. I think that they could utilize this uniqueness in a better way than they have, and I will be chatting with some people about that soon. (laughs) I think that there’s a, a great potential for Portland to be able to,
um, make a name for itself as the quarry town, as many small towns and other places have done. I don’t think they’re using their historic aspects of the town to their fullest.

I’m going to be getting together with some Portland residents soon (laughing) so we’ll be talking about some, some possibilities of what they can do. When the, the quarries were designated as a National Historic Landmark, they began doing some things related to linking Main Street to the quarries and doing things around that, and I think that that’s, kind of maybe lost some steam. They had folks from the National Park Service come do a survey with them and start planning things like and I, I don’t think that they’ve gotten there yet. I think they’ve still got a ways to go. And I’m not sure that everybody in town has really bought into it. That’s an important thing when you’re working with a town, that you have to get the residents on board to buy into whatever’s going to happen, whether you’re doing your, um, Plan of Conservation and Development or changing your subdivision regulations or whatever, you have to include members of the community in the process so that, by the time you get to the end, everybody’s so involved in it that it’s accepted. And, um, I think that if the residents of Portland had a better idea of what they had, they would probably do more with it. I’m an educator. That’s what I think of myself as, an educator, and periodically I come to town and I talk to people and I do some more educating.

One of the things that towns can do with their Plan of Conservation and Development is to include various things in their vision of what they want to do with, about the character of the town and what the town looks like and how they want to go about doing economic development and various things. And one of the things that they are allowed to do is to create a special overlay zone where different things can happen or things can be restricted from happening and within that overlay zone they could do things, like they could create a Quarry Overlay Zone and that zone could include the quarries, all the structures in the town, say within two streets from Main Street that are related to the quarries, so that they would have a protective zone and whenever anything came about, uh, any proposed developments, they can go to the overlay zone and say, “Well, this is required to happen” or, “This can’t happen,” or, “You have to do this,” or “You have to do that,” within that zone. And, uh, they had the opportunity to do this when the development company was proposing things because one of the things that they did was to uh, remove two historic quarry worker housing structures. One of them they moved and one of them they allowed the fire department to burn down. And, um, those were the last remaining quarry worker housing structures provided by the quarry companies for the quarry workers to live in. And they weren’t preserved. And now they’re gone. So if they had had that overlay zone, they could have said, “Well you have… Well you can’t destroy them. You could have them moved, or some other way of preserving them.”

The quarries are located on Brownstone Avenue. And there is another street perpendicular to Brownstone Avenue called Middlesex Avenue, which is between the intermediate school and the post office that goes down and runs along Mike’s quarry. And the town decided to connect those two streets. They were originally connected, in the old days, but over time, the connection was broken and no through street was there. There was a dirt path up where the old road was around those two structures that were destroyed. So they decided that they were gonna connect these two streets, so they got state money to do that. And I was down there with a group that was working on the Brownstone Park area and I saw that trees were being taken down and I asked what was going on and found out what they were gonna do and, because those two structures that were originally quarry housing sat right there, it looked to me like the construction of the road would go right through the old foundation, which I thought would be…
a place where there might be some material culture from the quarry workforce that lived there. So I went to the town, uh, first selectman and I asked her if they had had any archaeological survey and she said, “No.” And I said, “Well, have you talked to the state archaeologist?” And she said, “No.” And I said, “Well, it’s got state funding attached to it, doesn’t it?” She said, “Yes.” And I said, “You are required to have an archaeological survey.” So she and the state archaeologist connected with each other and I met the state archaeologist out there and I became the archaeological surveyor of the site. (chuckles) And had to go there periodically to do, surface collecting to preserve whatever might turn up during the project.

It was all surface collecting. But I still have quite a bit of material. And as they move the, the soil around to, um, construct the road, they would churn up things. So there was quite a bit of stuff that turned up. And I did find some clay pipes that might be fairly old but I’m not sure yet. I’m not finished processing all the artifacts, uh, but I do have some that go back to about 1850, which is about the time when those buildings were first occupied. So I will, probably, be able to go back at least as far as the beginning of the occupancy. A lot of twentieth century stuff and nobody studies twentieth century artifacts, material culture, in any great detail. You can find more on sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth century, um, glassware and porcelain than you can, uh, twentieth century. So now, I’m trying to, um, catalog the, the things that I collected, and, uh, sort them and identify them, but it hasn’t been easy because there’s just so much of it. So I still have a lot to do there. Hopefully I’ll finish that before Christmas because I have to get it out of the living room (chuckles) And I have to talk, you’re going to talk to Jack Dillon and I want to talk to him about that site myself.

Even before I started working in archaeology, I had always encouraged the town to preserve whatever’s there and when they, uh, were beginning to consider the Hayes brothers’ proposal of their recreation park down there, I encouraged the town to have someone look into whatever material culture might be found down there while this was all going on and I don’t know that the town followed through on that, um, so – anything that was in the quarry, in the hole itself, I think has been pretty much removed at this point in time. They’ve been diving down there and I don’t think they’ve found anything. Um, my suspicion is that anything that might have survived that was metal of any kind went to be used during World War II or has rusted away.

I think that there is some potential [for archaeology] because that whole area was utilized. Um, the thing is, there’s been a lot of disturbance down there and, um, there’s a lot of waste material that probably is covering whatever you might find, so it would be a big project and I think probably, to go down through all that major riprap along the river you wouldn’t find much of anything and I know that some archaeologists have told the town that, but there’s always a potential. And there are some unusual things down there that I’ve found and um, should have some study done on, and um, now that the Hayes brothers have cleared away around the edge of the quarry there might be some potential for little things to be found. And I know that, that, the um, quarry workers often carved their initials into the walls, and a good time to go look for things like that is in the wintertime, when the quarries are frozen over and now that the, uh, all that excess vegetation is removed, that, that would be something to do that I haven’t done in a couple years.

There are some remnants of some of the, uh, the derricks that were used. You can oftentimes find piece of the, um, wire, heavy-gauge wire that they used and a, a few other things, some of the mounting hooks that are drilled into the stone around the edges that there’s some of those, and there was some unusual thing that they found down there that, uh, nobody’s been able
to figure out what it is. I think that the Hayes brothers keep it on display but nobody’s figured out what it could be. There are also some unusual aspects to the area that were done by the industry. When you go down to the platform where the Hayes brothers have their main entrance, there’s a staircase that goes down into the, the quarries that’s mostly underwater now, but my suspicion is that that was an entrance from the Brainerd quarry office into the Brainerd quarry down those steps. And there are some other unusual kinds of things along the side of that promontory too that I have no idea what they were used for.

I guess it is a relationship because I’ve been interested in this subject for a long time now and whenever I’m anywhere, there’s the potential for this subject matter to be there, whether I’m traveling in New York City and visiting a museum and walking down the street and finding a brownstone where I never knew there was one before or I’m in a foreign country where they’ve used the same material for construction of a building, and, “Well, there it is again!” It’s basically a part of me and I’ve talked to people all over about this subject. I have provided information for other researchers and they have provided information with me, we’ve collaborated, we’ve talked about it. I’ve talked about it with folks who’ve come here to visit the quarries for one reason or another: their relative worked in the quarries, they’re researching a building, or something related to that, and it seems to permeate everything.

Now I’m looking into Native American uses for sandstone. So, I want that pre-contact use of the stone. ‘Cause most of what I’ve done is historic, post-contact. They used sandstone for smoothing, because the grains of sand were good for smoothing things, and they would use that particularly on arrows to scrape the bark off and make them smooth and aerodynamic, so sometimes you will find grooved pieces of sandstone, and that’s what they did with it. Occasionally, you’ll find sandstone used for other things, but not very often, so I’m just starting out to find what might be used. And it might be used as a hammerstone, but it’s not a major resource for Native Americans, at least in this part of the country. In the western part of the United States, you’ve got, of course, the Native Americans in the Southwest that are living in the whole area of sandstone. That’s all that’s there. So there are some sacred sites, petroglyphs, pictographs, different things that I’ve started to look into.

I’ve studied ecology and various aspects of that and researched the life history of the beaver and various things related to that animal. I’ve looked into the use of shells by Native Americans to make wampum, I researched that. I’m interested in the use of natural resources and what people do with them and where they do it and… things like that. So if not brownstone, it would’ve been something else, I’m sure.

As far as, you know, being closest to the information, Jack [Jack Dillon]’s getting to be one of the last people. It’s troubling to me. One of the reasons why I’ve been interviewing my father, I’ve been doing this too, and there’s a sense of urgency related to that. And I don’t think that, um, I don’t think it’s a characteristic of Americans to understand that sense of urgency, of knowing your past or getting it recorded and having it there to, to look at later on, like in European countries, for example. Information is passed on, or Native Americans who have that oral tradition and passed it on to the new generation so it doesn’t get lost. And, um, you know, that loss, not only of the person, but of the subject matter that we’re talking about, the quarries… the town almost lost that site. So, um, the sense of urgency for me to is that I’m getting older. So, now we’re passing the baton, so to speak. I still think that there’s so much, when we talk about a thousand World War II vets dying every day, I mean, that’s incredible history disappearing. So… I feel a sense of urgency. So you guys will be the storytellers.
The story of the brownstone quarries is very interdisciplinary: you have geology, and within the geology area you have, um, dinosaur tracks and interesting prehistoric reptiles—that is always a good tease for any research project; you had various aspects of the development of the town, the industry itself and how it developed various quarrying practices and the evolution of the industry from primitive ways of extracting stone to the more, um, intricate, highly-industrialized methods at the end of 19th century; you had the story of, um, the people, many of them were immigrants, so you had this interesting mosaic of ethnicities that was involved. You have, uh, aspects of the labor movement that develop over the course of time. You also had that social structure within the quarry itself and what quarry owners did to command respect and power over the quarry, uh, labor force; and then you have the actual use of the stone, which is architecture, and the development of stylistics over time, reflected in the various, um, ways that people viewed architecture. So, it's far from just a dull pile of rocks—you have all these different aspects to it, to, to look into. And, you know, where it was used: who wanted it, why did they want it, and that aspect of it as well.

When I curated an exhibit at the Connecticut River Museum, uh, that garnered more information from more people who allowed us to borrow things from their families and that gathered more stories from more people. And when I would go out and I would talk about brownstone there was always someone who would come up to me afterwards and say, you know, "my relative worked there," and so that was another story that was added.

The quarries are located on Brownstone Avenue. And there is another, uh, street perpendicular to Brownstone Avenue called Middlesex Avenue, which is between the intermediate school and the post office that goes down and runs along Mike’s quarry. And the town decided to connect those two streets, so they got state money to, um, do that. And I was down there with a group that was working on the Brownstone Park area and I saw that trees were being taken down and I asked what was going on and found out what they were gonna do and, because those two structures that were originally quarry housing sat right there, it looked to me like the construction of the road would go right through the old foundation, which I thought would be… a place where there might be some material culture from the quarry workforce that lived there.

Quarry workers lived in various areas of town around the quarries. They were provided housing by the quarries, and they would pay for it at the end of the season when they would get paid. And if they, uh, had accumulated a lot of debt over the course of the quarry season, they might not get any money at the end of the season, when they got paid.

So I went to the town, uh, first selectman and I asked her if they had had any archaeological survey and she said, “No.” So she and the state archaeologist connected with each other and I met the state archaeologist out there and I became the archaeological surveyor of the site. (chuckles) And had to go there periodically to do, um, surface collecting to preserve whatever might turn up during the project. And whenever you have material culture like that, that connects you to a real human being, it brings the story to life.

It was a very powerful story, that was sort of languishing down there by the Connecticut River in the bushes, and, um, people in Portland didn't know where it was or the story behind it. So gradually over time, I would be in town enough times and hanging out and doing different
things, that, uh, they gradually became aware of what they had. For a while, most people were
ignorant of it. Um, I think that my continued work and showing up in Portland, periodically,
keeps it in the forefront, and since the, uh, creation of the Brownstone Quorum, a group of
Portland people who are interested in, in what’s going on related to the quarries, um, it’s more in,
in the public eye, and, um, it could be better. I think that there’s a, a great potential for Portland
to be able to, um, make a name for itself as the quarry town, as many small towns and other
places have done.

I guess it is a relationship because I’ve been interested in this subject for a long time now
and whenever I’m anywhere, there’s the potential for this subject matter to be there, whether I’m
traveling in New York City and visiting a museum and walking down the street and finding a
brownstone where I never knew there was one before or I’m in a foreign country where they’ve
used the same material for construction of a building, and, “Well, there it is again!” Um, it’s, it’s
basically a part of me and I’ve talked to people all over about this subject. I’m interested in the
use of natural resources and what people do with them and where they do it and… things like
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now we’re passing the baton, so to speak. I feel a sense of urgency. So you guys will be the
storytellers.
Laura Heath: This is Laura Heath and Morgan Hamill interviewing Allison Guinness on October 16th, 2009.

Morgan Hamill: I...I was wondering how, um, how you ended up going to Wesleyan—you did the GLSP Program?

Alison Guinness: I was part of the GLSP program and I started that, in, 1983, I think, and, uh, I was originally a French and English major. But when I came to Wesleyan I started out with a class on Japan, because we had had a Japanese exchange student stay with us one summer, and there was an interesting course being taught by Dave Titus that I took, and it was such a great class that I decided to continue in the program, and started taking some other interesting sounding classes, some of them were in geology, and eventually I ended up doing several classes in the Earth and Environmental Science program. And, uh, Jelle de Boer asked me if I would write the Brownstone Quarries research paper that was part of a grant that he had obtained from the Rockfall Foundation here in Middletown, to study some of the important quarry sites. That's how I got involved. And at the Rockfall Symposium, I think that was 1987—the fall of 1987—we had our paper and project on exhibit at that symposium. Now I'm not sure if that was the first of the Rockfall Symposia or not, but it was presented there. Uh, right in front of the dinosaur tracks in the hall of the Science Center.

LH: And... uh, how did you...what made you decide to do a more interdisciplinary thesis?

Uh, the story of the brownstone quarries is very interdisciplinary: you have geology, and within the geology area you have, um, dinosaur tracks and interesting prehistoric reptiles—that is always a good tease for any research project; you had various aspects of the development of the town, the industry itself and how it developed various quarrying practices and the evolution of the industry from primitive ways of extracting stone to the more, um, intricate, highly-industrialized methods at the end of 19th century; you had the story of, um, the people, many of them were immigrants, some from Ireland, some from Sweden, as well as, uh, people who lived in the surrounding area who are of English descent, you also had some Cornish people who were quarrying there—so you had this interesting mosaic of ethnicities that was involved, and within those ethnicities you had a certain amount of, um, social stresses, because the Irish who came to work there were Catholics, and the existing people here were of Puritan extraction, and, uh, basically Anglican or Congregational; and you also had the fact that the Irish spoke with thick brogues and it was difficult for the existing townspeople to understand them, so you get that tension growing over the years of quarrying; you have, uh, aspects of the labor movement that develop over the course of time—if you think the economy is bad now, you should study some of the, um, major depressions of the 19th century; the defected, the labor force, quarrying, uh, the amount of money made, how much people were paid—you also had that social structure within the quarry itself and what quarry owners did to command respect and power over the quarry, uh, labor force; and then you have the actual use of the stone, which is architecture, and the development of stylistics over time, reflected in the various, um, ways that people viewed architecture and the, part of the social structure, 'cause you're—the reason for the popularity of brownstone was the fact that it fit in so well with the romantic ideas of, uh, earth and earth-tones,
and that sort of thing. And as that goes away, you see the decline of the industry. So, there are all those various things wrapped up in the story. So, it's far from just a dull pile of rocks—you have all these different aspects to it, to, to look into. And, you know, where it was used: who wanted it, why did they want it, and that aspect of it as well. So, it's a very interesting story. And sandstone, uh, has uses that go way back in time, and, so that makes it interesting too, that it's not just a static use.

MH: Given that there was so many, sort of, disciplines encompassed in that, how long...how long did the research project take out of your life?

Not long! Um, I think it may have started in '85...I can't remember anymore, it's been so long. And, the project had to be done for Rockfall in a certain amount of time, I don't remember how long. But, it, it was a very short span of time that the initial work was done. But every time I would do a program on this for some group in the local area, people would come up to me and they would add stories to it. Um, you know, they, they would see a slide I would show and they would come and say, "I think that might have been so and so," and so, you, you get more information the more you're out there, the more you get back because people recognize things and they add to the history. And when we did a show on that at the Connecticut River Museum, people know we were doing that and we sort of made, uh, an ad saying that we were doing this exhibit, and if you had any information or your family members worked there, you know, please contact us. And so we got more people involved, who brought us their histories, their family photographs, and things like that, and allowed us to borrow those pieces of memorabilia for the exhibit. And then when the exhibit opened, then more people would see it, and they would keep adding to the information.

LH: What were some of your favorite stories and pieces of information that you learned that way?

From the people?

LH: Uhm-hum.

Um, well, there was a lady up in, um, Wethersfield, whose family had been involved in the quarries, whom I went up to visit a couple of times. And, they loaned us one of their family member's toolboxes, that contained all the tools that this quarryman had used over his lifetime of working in the quarries, working on the stone. And whenever you have material culture like that, that connects you to a real human being, it brings the story to life. So that was very cool.

MH: Did you, did you have any prior familiarity with the, the quarries before you—

No, I didn't.

MH: —none at all, it just was, sort of, out of the blue?

Out of the blue...would you like to—well, I had visited them during a geology class, so it wasn't as though I didn't know where they were, what they were. So I had...that was part of a course on
Connecticut geology that I took with Dick Liebe at Wesleyan, so we went there and we went across the valley, and saw different, uh, sandstone formations. So, you know, I knew the history, the geologic history.

*LH:* So what did you think your project would be like when you first started your project, what form did you think it would take.

I really didn't know. Um, I had...I knew that I had to start with the geology. And the historical information and particularly any photographs that were extant showing the quarrying process, and that sort of thing. So, once you go to some historic site, which, at that time, I went to the library because that's where the historical collection was then housed, and you start digging, and then you start to collect the information which leads to questions. And from those questions you branch out like a web to collect all the information. And you hear a story about this person, and you follow that story. One of the stories, uh, was about, um, Dr. Barrett. Dr. Barrett was supposed to have been a geologist from England who came here and didn't do geology—actually he was a medical doctor, he came here and didn't do medicine. He got involved in collecting fossils and minerals because this was a very well-known area for its mineral deposits and people would come from all over the place to collect. And so Dr. Barrett collected fossils and he acquired quite a collection and people knew about his collection, and he was also a very well-known botanist. And, uh, was written up in several, uh, journals and wrote articles in some very early botanical journals in the United States. So, he was buried in the Indian Hill cemetery here in Middletown and someone told me that I should go see his grave marker. So I went to the cemetery, drove all around, couldn't find the thing, and finally stopped to ask somebody and they took me to Dr. Barrett's stone. It is one of the most interesting gravestones you will ever find. The front of it is a big slab of brownstone, and on one side, the side...the west-facing side, they carved all his pertinent information: his name, where he came from, and he was a botanist and a geologist, his...where he came from, and that sort of thing. On the back side, it's completely covered with dinosaur tracks. And the big chunk of stone that holds that slab up has two fossil tree trunks, and in between the two tree trunks they carved “The Testimony of the Rocks,” which was one of the first geologic papers ever written, by Marsh, from, um, I think he was Scottish, and that was the title of what his paper, his work, was named. So here was this fantastic gravestone: it had dinosaur tracks on it; it had this interesting man who was related to what was going on. So, you have these unique stories and connections, and for a person doing research like that, it's one of those eureka moments that you look for.

*LH:* What was the most surprising thing to you about how your project changed, over the time you worked on it?

Uh, the most surprising thing about this is the extent to which it keeps morphing. Um, one of the most interesting structures that was built out of Portland brownstone was a building in San Francisco. And it was the mansion home of James Flood. Which is interesting in itself because there were Floods in Portland, not related to this Flood. James Flood was one of the partners in the Comstock Lode, in Nevada. I don't know if you're familiar with that, but it was a huge silver strike, and it made them wealthy beyond their dreams. And James Flood visited the east to see how the wealthy lived here, and he went to New York City, where on the main avenues were brownstone mansions and on the numbered streets were brownstone row-houses, and he met
with wealthy people and he decided that he wanted one of those brownstone mansions for himself, in San Francisco. So he contracted with the Middlesex quarry to provide the stone; it took them two years to quarry enough stone for this building. Some of the blocks were thirteen feet long and twenty-two inches square; it had to be loaded on ships here, hauled down the Connecticut River, into Long Island Sound, to New York—there were a lot of stone yards on the east coast of Manhattan and on the west coast of Brooklyn—and they would offload the stone and put them on ships that were bound for other ports. So this stone had to be loaded on to ships that were bound for San Francisco—before the Panama Canal, which meant they had to all go around Cape Horn, which is a miracle in itself, and get to San Francisco. So, this building stood on Nob Hill, in San Francisco, from about 1884 until the great earthquake in 1906. It was the only mansion to survive the earthquake and fire. It was gutted, but because it was made out of stone, it survived. So after the fire, it was purchased by the Pacific Club and the Union Club. They were two private men's clubs in San Francisco who joined together to buy the building...or, the site, actually, they were going to, uh, take the building down and do something else, but the earthquake came along, and that changed their minds, and depression, and all kinds of other things, so they just renovated the building. And that story in itself is very interesting and unique, and I had the opportunity to go to San Francisco and go to the historical collections at the library and see that there were, after the earthquake, a little tent city next to that building. That people were living in, next to that surviving building that came from here. When everything else was gone.

MH: How did...were there any, like, particular ways you noticed that the, the whole process of, of researching and writing, um, sort of, changed the way you thought about, about the quarries, or about Portland?

Um, well, I...I came to understand the importance of that site, and that's why I kept badgering the town about acquiring it whenever it became possible, because I knew of its importance and its value to the country. Um, not all the brownstone in New York City came from Portland—some of it came from New Jersey and possibly from Pennsylvania—but a good deal of it came from Connecticut, and came to represent a building—brownstone—and even after brownstone wasn't used in that particular style of construction, they were still called brownstones. So, it was a very powerful story, that was sort of languishing down there by the Connecticut River in the bushes, and, um, people in Portland didn't know where it was or the story behind it. So gradually over time, I would be in town enough times and hanging out and doing different things, that, uh, they gradually became aware of what they had.

MH: Where are you...where are you from initially—where did you, sort of, where did you come from, to Wesleyan?

Where did I come from? (laughs)

MH: You know, where were you...where were you before?

I'm, I'm originally from Baltimore, Maryland.

MH: Baltimore, okay.
Uh, which I came to find out has a great deal of brownstone itself. And I was hoping during this research to find out that the Smithsonian was built of Portland stone, but it's not, it's made of Maryland stone. And after that I would go down to visit my aunt in Baltimore and she and I would go out cruising around Baltimore looking for old brownstone buildings. So, uh, I have some pictures of buildings there. And then, you know, gradually everywhere you would look. I learned of a, a building that survived the Civil War, down in one of the Carolinas, I think it's in Charleston. And it was a bank. And it was made out of Portland brownstone! And it even had a cannonball lodged in one of the walls that had come through the building, but still survived, and had been renovated at the time that I was doing the original research for this project. So I contacted them, not only to find out about the building, but the restoration process, because brownstone restoration has become a very important industry in itself, and preserving the stone, and, um, various techniques that have developed over the last forty years or so, to preserve those particular buildings. And, um, some unique methods for either filling in places that have rotted away and disappeared or replacing them. And Wesleyan had a major project done on the '92 Theater one year, and the chapel had some work done on it. But the '92 Theater had some major restoration work done on it.

*LH: Do you think they did a good job?*

Yes, they chose one of the best companies I know of… to do that work. Which is also the same company that did the, um, restoration of the Old State House in Hartford. And this is before Mike opened his quarry so there was no replacement stone available. They were going to, uh, Germany to get replacement stone. So instead of doing replacement stone, they did a process called Jahn which is, basically, creating a brown cement to do the patching, and then by having very skillful artisans do that work; it looks very much like stone rather than just patching material. So, um, they’re… they do a very good job. I’ve seen some not-so-good jobs, too. And stone preservation has become such an important thing in the late twentieth century, that, uh, there are now preservation, um, programs offered where you can get degrees in architectural preservation. And one of them is in Baltimore.

*MH: Along the same lines, what, what do you think of the living quarrying operation? Do think it’s a good use of...*

The one that Mike is doing in there?

*MH: Yeah.*

Yes. Because there you have the old quarries that were used for several hundred years right next to an actual working quarry, where people can see the quarrying process. And Mike still does some of the same things they did a hundred years ago that haven’t changed any as well as the new processes that are being used, all right there in the same area. So it’s, uh, it’s a boon for anything the town can do if they decided that that’s something they wanted to highlight about the town. And, um, have people actually see what goes on in a quarry. And a lot of it is still back-breaking, labor-intensive work.
LH: How do you think people would react to seeing that if they were paying more attention?

I think that they would have a better understanding of what goes into the production of materials. And, um, have a greater appreciation for what’s involved. And people are always looking for the cheapest product, but to actually replace something with it’s original, the original item that was put there two or three hundred years ago is a pretty amazing thing to do. You can’t do that with very many things. So to have that long line, continuous line of production is a rare thing. Especially when you can say that there aren’t many quarries in operation.

LH: When you say that you’ve seen bad restoration jobs... what is it that makes them bad? Is it that they look like they’ve been restored and not original? or...

Well, over the course of time, people have, um, done patching with material that wasn’t, um, either good quality or the color didn’t match, and on some buildings, you could look at them and see this patchwork. It looked like a crazy quilt of patching. And different colors and different textures of medium and things like that. So that’s what I mean by “bad project.”

MH: What do you think about the, the water park?

I think that the water park is a good use for the site. It utilizes, uh, the facility for some important work. They teach underwater diving and that’s a big thing now in underwater archaeology, so that’s where people can go and learn how to do that kind of work, which we don’t do very much of here in Connecticut. Uh, underwater archaeology is, uh, becoming a more and more utilized discipline within the archaeological community these days. So that’s a good thing, people can go there and have fun and enjoy themselves, and, and see an important historic site. And it’s utilized and, um, it brings more awareness to the quarries and the history and what’s there. They cleaned all the terrible overgrowth that was all around the site, so you can see more of, um, some of the, the structures that were utilized in the quarrying process around the quarries. And it gets people down there. And, um, I’m glad that they, um, have done that.

MH: It’s pretty cool. (Chuckles)

LH: Do you think that there are any problems with that, that there might be a better way to use the quarries or are you just happy with it?

Um, I don’t know there’s a better way to use the quarries. Uh, about twenty years ago, someone, someone, a development company had purchased the quarries and the surrounding land and were planning to put in condos on the upper area near where Mike is quarrying and they were going to make a canal from the river into the quarry just below where Mike is working and they were gonna have a big marina in there. And there was, uh, quite a bit of controversy about that. And, uh, that was not a use that I felt was good. And there were some environmental concerns about that, and, um, even some people who wondered if it was possible to connect the quarries and the river and how that hydrologic dynamic would work out. And that was, they, uh, that was when the economy tanked and, uh, they went out of business and they went into foreclosure and the bank obtained the quarries, and that’s when I kept telling the town, “This is the time to get the quarries. You won’t get a chance like this again!” So that’s when they went through the process
of acquiring the quarries and, uh, some other land in that area. So I don’t think that would’ve been a good use of the site. The only thing that concerns me is the fact that the town, itself, only has access to the site once or twice a year, where the, uh, people, townspeople can go there and utilize the facility.

**LH: How did the process of the town acquiring the quarry work?**

The, uh, development company went out of business, which meant that all of their holdings went into foreclosure because they couldn’t pay the banks and the bank holding company was contacted and I believe it was in Florida. It wasn’t an easy process. And then the town had to contact the bank and work out a purchase agreement with the bank to acquire that. Then the town has to go through the process of coming up with the money and the approval of the townspeople to appropriate that money or bond it out, or however they plan to pay for it, in order to do that. So it was a, a process that they had to go through, in convincing everyone in town that it was a good idea, and that we should do this and the amount of money put forth to do that.

**LH: How did they persuade people it was a good idea?**

Uh, they, uh, had a number of meetings, town meetings, to discuss the project and, um, various people would come and talk about it, and things like that.

**MH: Did they have any idea of what kinda uses they might want to put it to at that point?**

No.

**MH: It was just a matter of, here’s the opportunity?**

Yeah… Well, they, that’s one of the things that I mentioned about planning around the quarries and they still really haven’t done that. There are some people in town who have been working on connecting Main Street and the quarries in various ways, but, uh, as, as a, you know, a town project, they really haven’t rigged all that together.

**LH: And how would they start going about doing that?**

Well, one of the things that towns can do with their Plan of Conservation and Development is to include various things in their vision of what they want to do with, about the character of the town and what the town looks like and how they want to go about doing economic development and various things. And one of the things that they are allowed to do is to create a special overlay zone where different things can happen or things can be restricted from happening and within that overlay zone they could do things, like they could create a Quarry Overlay Zone and that zone could include the quarries, all the structures in the town, say within two streets from Main Street that are related to the quarries, so that they would have a protective zone and whenever anything came about, uh, any proposed developments, they can go to the overlay zone and say, “Well, this is required to happen” or, “This can’t happen,” or, “You have to do this,” or “You have to do that,” within that zone. And, uh, they had the opportunity to do this when the development company was proposing things because one of the things that they did was to uh,
remove two historic quarry worker housing structures. One of them they moved and one of them they allowed the fire department to burn down. And, um, those were the last remaining quarry worker housing structures provided by the quarry companies for the quarry workers to live in. And they weren’t preserved. And now they’re gone. So if they had had that overlay zone, they could have said, “Well you have… Well you can’t destroy them. You could have them moved, or some other way of preserving them.”

LH: How involved have you gotten in pushing for preservation or development?

Well, in Portland, every now and then I have to go to Portland and say things like, write letters or talk to people or whatever. So I have been there on, and this year I have been there, in Portland, a lot. Because they have had several projects that I have intervened in.

LH: Like what?

Uh, the quarries are located on Brownstone Avenue. And there is another, uh, street perpendicular to Brownstone Avenue called Middlesex Avenue, which is between the intermediate school and the post office that goes down and runs along Mike’s quarry. And the town decided to connect those two streets. They were originally connected, in the old days, but over time, the connection was broken and no through street was there. There was a, um, a dirt path up where the old road was around those two structures that were destroyed. So they decided that they were gonna connect these two streets, so they got state money to, um, do that. And I was down there with a group that was working on the Brownstone Park area and I saw that trees were being taken down and I asked what was going on and found out what they were gonna do and, because those two structures that were originally quarry housing sat right there, it looked to me like the construction of the road would go right through the old foundation, which I thought would be… a place where there might be some material culture from the quarry workforce that lived there. So I went to the town, uh, first selectman and I asked her if they had had any archaeological survey and she said, “No.” And I said, “Well, have you talked to the state archaeologist?” And she said, “No.” And I said, “Well, it’s got state funding attached to it, doesn’t it?” She said, “Yes.” And I said, “You are required to have an archaeological survey.” So she and the state archaeologist connected with each other and I met the state archaeologist out there and I became the archaeological surveyor of the site. (chuckles) And had to go there periodically to do, um, surface collecting to preserve whatever might turn up during the project. So that was one reason why I was in town a lot. And then they had this other project going on where there was a development proposal on the corner of Route 66 and Main Street where there were three historic structures. One of them was a quarry owner house and the proposal was to raze all those buildings, and so I wrote a letter to the Planning and Zoning Commission about that. Unfortunately, the most important house didn’t get saved.

MH: Did anything interesting turn up at the archaeological sites you surveyed?

Uh, I’m not finished processing all the artifacts, uh, but I do have some that go back to about 1850, which is about the time when those buildings were first occupied. So I will, probably, be able to go back at least as far as the beginning of the occupancy. A lot of twentieth century stuff.
And I have to talk, you’re going to talk to Jack Dillon and I want to talk to him about that site myself.

*LH:* Was it all surface survey or did you do any excavation up there?

It was all surface collecting. But I still have quite a bit of material. And as they move the, the soil around to, um, construct the road, they would churn up things. So there was quite a bit of stuff that turned up. And I did find some clay pipes that might be fairly old but I’m not sure yet.

*LH:* So where will all those artifacts end up once you’ve finished analyzing them?

Uh, I told someone at the historical society that, uh, they should expect that stuff to come to them. So I’m still working on it.

*MH:* (unintelligible)

*LH:* Well, I think we’d like to talk to you again, listen to it and transcribe it and think through it and talk to you again.

Okay.

*LH:* Is there anything else that comes to mind that you’d like to share before we...

Oh, I can talk about brownstone for hours

*LH:* (laughs)

*MH:* Well, hopefully there’ll be some more time for that.

*LH:* Yeah. Well, thank you.

*MH:* Thank you very much.

You’re welcome.
Laura Heath: This is Laura Heath and Morgan Hamill interviewing Allison Guinness on November 20th, 2009, in the Russell Library, in Middletown, Connecticut.

Morgan Hamill: Um, yeah, well...the first thing we wanted to start off with this time, um...we were wondering if you could talk more about some historical stuff, um, specifically—at least at first—anything you might now about the labor movement and its involvement with the quarries.

The labor movement...um, in the earliest days of quarrying, labor was local. And, um, it grew from the resident population. But as industry evolved and there were less and less local people available, quarry owners had to look elsewhere. Because they were evolving into a big industry and they needed a lot more workers. So they would use, um, uh, people from...labor brokers, who would be able to find them people to come here to work in the quarries. And the earliest ones were the Irish. In the, um, early nineteenth century the Irish were coming to America because of the conditions in Ireland. If you're not aware of what was happening in Ireland, I can give you a little background on that. The, uh, English government was very harsh to the Irish population, because, for...the biggest reason was because they were still Catholic. And they encouraged the, um, creation of plantations, which is how America was populated, by creating English plantations. And so Englishmen moved to Ireland and began these plantations and began to take over the countryside, and take over the Irish and make them, well, not even second-class citizens. And over time they developed these laws that did not allow the Irish to own property, to practice their religion, to go to school and a number of other things. So the Irish began coming to America early in the nineteenth century, so by 1834, there were already Irishmen working in the quarries. And as the, um, expansion of the industry—and also the great famine that occurred in the 1840s—a lot of Irish came to America looking for a better life. So there were thousands of Irish coming to America at that time. So the labor brokers found a number of Irishmen to add to who was already here. And if you had...there were a lot of family connections, and friend connections, and the Irish told their friends and family, “come here to work, there's work available in the quarries.” So, over time, a large number of Irish came to Portland to work in the quarries. So you had English, Cornish, Scots, and Irish for a goodly amount of the nineteenth century working in the quarries. And up to...between a quarter and a third of the labor force was Irish. And in the 1870s, um, in the early, I think it was in 1871, that the Irish struck for higher wages. So the quarry owners, again, went to New York City looking for immigrant labor and they brought the Scots—uh, not the Scots—the Swedes to Portland to work in the quarries. So then you had an influx of a lot of Swedish people into Portland. So the labor force was primarily the, the English, Irish, Scots, and the Swedes. Uh, there's been, always been a lot of talk about the Italians and their role in the construction industry and, and quarrying. But they did not come until the late nineteenth century. By the time they arrived the quarrying industry in Portland is on the decline—so there may have been a handful of Italians working there. And then by the beginning of the twentieth century the quarries are basically not even functioning; so little was going on there. And, um, over the course of time, the, um, quarry owners had a number of rules and regulations and, um, operating procedures that they used in the operation of the quarries. Um, they only wanted men of good character, and somehow or other they managed to figure out who was of good character; I don't know how they did that, there's nothing in the record of that. However we know that the Irish have a reputation for, um, a problem with sobriety, but,
occasionally one or two of them, I guess, would not go to work because of intoxication, but there's not too much record for that either.

Um, the quarrying season ran from April to whenever the river froze and they couldn't ship. So the largest, the bulk of the labor force was from April until then, and over the winter there were still a number of people who were employed but much less than during the, um, regular quarrying season. And you worked from sunup to sundown. So in the early Spring your days were shorter, as you got into summer the days expanded, and then towards the fall you had a decline of work hours. So you could work a pretty long day in the middle of the summer. And, um, as you moved through the season, too, your midday break expanded. So in April your midday break was an hour and then by full summer it was two hours. They also, um, didn't work when there was rain or snow. If it was too hot or too cold, they didn't work. They broke for funerals that were going to the cemetery that I told you about the last time. So, um, they would allow the funeral to take place and then they would go back to work, 'cause it was pretty noisy, operating in the quarries.

And, um, wages varied depending on who you were. There were some salaried employees, primarily the English who owned and operated or who had higher ranking positions within the quarry. Um, regular day laborers were paid by the day; there were some people who were paid by the month. But looking over the records, you actually made more money if you worked by the day rather than by the month. And by the early 1870s most of the workers were making about $2.50 a day, which by labor standards in the U.S. was a pretty good wage. In 1873 there was a major, uh, recession, and a lot of the workers were laid off and pay dropped to a dollar a day and it never went back up again. So that was pretty much the, the high point in wages for labor. Although, after that period of time was actually the peak of the production. So, labor was very much affected by what was going on with the economy, even though the quarry— the industry— was running pretty well.

Um, during the, the operation of the quarries, when they wanted to do, um, some blasting, they would do that during times when the men were out of the quarry, always. So they might do that at lunchtime, during break or they might do it over the weekend when there was nobody there. But they did work a six day week. And they were off on Sunday. Um, and there were various, uh, activities going on within the quarry. So you would have men who were actually removing stone from the quarry face; you would have men who were in another area who would be rough dressing the stone; and, um, then they would move it out to the, uh, the wharf where it would be loaded onto ships and before the advent of the, uh, Connecticut Steam Brownstone Company in 1884 it would go elsewhere to be dressed, unless it went to a local mason who did his own work. Um, in the early days of quarrying, they would, um, move the stone and bury it for a period of time, so that it would age. And they called that scrappling. And that would allow the moisture to get out of the stone, because if you trap the moisture inside, that, uh, encouraged the disintegration of the stone. So you wanted it to dry out. And later on they found that they didn't have to bury it, so they could just stack it in various places and let it dry out. It was easier to work when it was wet and soft, than it was when it was dried out, but it didn't disintegrate as much as it...you would, uh, let it age. Uh, some of the stone went to New York City and was used by, uh, speculators and they didn't want to wait for the stone, they wanted it fast, so they
would get it quickly and un-, uh, scrappled, and then they...when it would go up it would begin to disintegrate almost immediately.

Um, quarry workers lived in various areas of town around the quarries. There was one site, uh, down in the area under what is now the Arrigoni Bridge, which had a lot of quarry housing in that area. And there was some up on the upper level, above the quarries and various places along Main Street, where quarry workers lived. They were provided housing by the quarries, and they would pay for it at the end of the season when they would get paid. And if they, uh, had accumulated a lot of debt over the course of the quarry season, they might not get any money at the end of the season, when they got paid. Uh, some of the quarry workers were literate, some were not; they had, um, a form that they signed off on at the beginning of the quarry season, and a lot of them put an X for their name on there. I don't recall any particular distribution of literacy between the different ethnic groups that worked there. Uh, the Irish had some difficulty, uh, assimilating for a couple of reasons. The biggest one: because they were Catholic. And that was a problem for them because everyone who was already here was Protestant. And they also had, um, strong accents, which made it difficult for them to communicate with the established English population, so that was a little bit of a problem. Uh, over the course of time, though, they built themselves a church in Middletown, in 1852—St. John's—at the head of Main Street; it was one of the first Irish churches in the state of Connecticut. And, um, the Irish worshiped there for a number of years, and had their own cemetery behind the church. And if you look at the gravestones in that cemetery, you will see that they are distinctly different from any of the early New England cemeteries in Connecticut. One across the street, the oldest one in Middletown, the, uh, Riverview Cemetery—or Riverside, it's, it's either Riverview or Riverside. There are the same cemeteries in every town and they have those names, and I, you know, in my town it's either Riverview or Riverside, you know, and the opposite here. So, anyway, um, the Irish has a distinctive, um, carving style that they used for their gravestones, which is very different from the English. Uh, they had, um, they could get credit at the stores. Some of the Irish who came, who didn't work on the quarries, established stores that were populated by the, um, Irish population who worked in the quarries. So gradually over time the Irish became, um, assimilated and became a part of the community and today you'll probably find more Irish names in Portland than you will English names. And, um, there are probably other things that I could tell you that I can't think of off the top of my head.

LH: When, the, first the Irish and then the Swedes were, kind of, brought in by labor brokers, was that to prevent, to prevent people from unionizing, or was that just to get cheap labor—what was the motivation for bringing in new groups of people?

Well, they needed to fill the, the gap in their labor force, and the Swedes fit in very well, even though they probably spoke English with a, a strong accent, but they were Protestants. So they already had something going for them when they got here, is that they were Protestants and not Catholics. 'Cause there was still a great deal of, uh, tension between, um, the Protestant population in Connecticut and Catholics. Um, if you know anything about the history of Connecticut, um...during the Revolutionary War there were a number of Irish Patriots that fought on the side of the Revolution. And a lot was going on here in Connecticut and the New England area in the early days of the Revolutionary War. And George Washington passed through Connecticut many times, and he told the, um, the government of Connecticut that they had to get
used to the idea that there were gonna to be Catholics and Irish fighting in the Revolution. And that was the beginning of Connecticut finally getting the idea that there had to be some kind of equality as far as religion was concerned. But there was still a lot of latent tension by the time you've got the quarrying going on. So it's still there. And if you talk to some of the older people in town, they might tell you that this lasted into the twentieth century.

LH: Hmm. And, you said that the Irish had a strike, was... were there, like, unions for everyone in the quarry, or were they, was it pretty divided?

They were; they weren't technically unionized.

LH: Okay.

I, I don't think they ever were. But they could get together and say that they were gonna strike, and not go to work, for particular days or reasons or whatever. And they took off their holidays, too. Their Catholic holidays, they took those off. Um, and there were other times when they were off: when the circus came to town, everybody was off to go to the circus. Um, you, you don't find any references to owing your soul to the company store, like the song, but you definitely owed just about everybody in town by the end of the season. You owed the doctor, you owed the mercantile, you owed whoever you had borrowed from. And they would also ask for advances on their pay, too. Now that's everybody, not just the Irish.

LH: And I was also wondering, um, what did the Irish Catholic gravestones look like and did, are, are they more distinctively different for the earlier gravestones than...

They're more Gothic style in nature, uh, shaped like big arches from Cathedrals, with, um, the, um, various trefoil forms in them sometimes, and, um, that general shape. More pointed than you would see in some of the uh early gravestones in the old cemeteries.

MH: The other thing we were wondering about, as far as historical stuff goes, is, we've heard from a few of the people, um, sort of, different stories about the incorporation of Portland and its separation, first from Middletown and then from, I forget what it was called, um...we were wondering if, if you knew anything about that— and we've heard that the quarries played a role in that.

Well the quarry owners were very much involved in what was going on in the town. They were, uh, involved in starting banks, being partners or stock-owners in other companies, and in the social life of the community, they were very much involved. Uh, I don't know how much specifically they were involved in the, the separating off of, um, the area as a different town. In order to do that, you had to go to the legislature and you had to petition for, first, a religious society, meaning that you could establish your own church. So that would mean that you would create a church and then you would be able to have population increase around that religious community. And then go back to the legislature and petition to be a town. And you had to have a...garnered a certain amount of population before you could do that. In the case of this area, the Middletown settlement, the Middletown settlement was a big chunk of land on both sides of the Connecticut River, and as parts of the settlement gained population, petitioned for churches— or
ecclesiastical societies, they were called—then they could go back to the legislature and ask to be a town. So, for Middletown settlement, um, the land on the east side of the Connecticut River was first referred to as East Middletown. And then it was Chatham, and finally, in 1841, the legislature allowed Chatham to be divided into two towns. One is East Hampton, and the other is Portland. And I think that, um, Portland was wise in the choice of the name of their town, rather than remaining as East Middletown, because most of—well, all of—the population's activities were primarily in the Middletown side of the river, and oftentimes when you have an area divided by a river and you have an “East whatever-it-is” and the town, the “East” part becomes a stepchild kind of thing, and I think you get an identity problem. But Portland having its own specific name, rather than East Middletown, was probably a good idea for it to do that. Um, gradually over time the west side of the river area was divided up into Portland (she means Middletown), Middlefield and part of Middletown went on to be Berlin. So, uh, it depended on, you know, how the legislature looked at things, because what they wanted to maintain was that no area gained a population so big as to require more than two representatives in the legislature. And that was the reason for that.

LH: And...what's your take on the, on the deal with Wesleyan about using the Portland stone and at that point was, where was Portland in its— it was still part of Middletown at that point, I guess. And how did people, do you know how people felt about using the stone that's on that side of the river to make a school, to help build the school on this side of the river?

Well it was still all Middletown at that time. Uh, I've never found anything on my research that really speaks to that question. The town owned the town quarry, and they could do whatever they wanted with it. Um, it's like the City of Hartford owns Elizabeth Park, but Elizabeth Park is in West Hartford. It's an unusual thing, but it does occur from time to time. So, the Town of Middletown owns this quarry across the river, and it's for whatever use they see fit. It was lucky for the University that they worked out that deal, because that benefited the school for a long time.

LH: to go back to something that you had said...um, you said the, the, um, quarry workers didn't work during the winter. Did they kind of hang around Portland, and—

Well, a certain number of them did. There was a traditional view that was told to me, that the quarry, the Irish quarry workers in particular would collect their pay in the fall when the, they closed for the winter, and then they would go home to Ireland. Well, that, they really didn't do that. They stayed here and they probably did odd jobs over the winter, and some of them did work at the quarries: there was a winter work crew and there was a summer work crew that was larger. So, um, the story that they all left, I, I don't think is accurate. For one thing, it's one heck of a voyage over the north Atlantic in the wintertime. And I don't think that they would do that. And they became more established here, and if you look at the census records, they're, they're all here. They don't really seem to be going anywhere. And there was, um, an early, um, population of Irish in the northern part of, north Middletown area. You know, in the very early days; so there was already an established Irish community here.
MH: Um, we were wondering if you could talk a little bit more about, when you were writing your paper on the quarries, um, the details of the research process and, sort of, where you found the most information.

Um, I started out at the Portland Library, where at that time the Historical Society had a little room with an exhibit, and most of the, the history of the quarries were kept in the library. And, unfortunately, when I got there, somebody had already been there before me and had absconded with a great deal of what material they had, so, I went through whatever they had left. And, um, then I, you know, gradually found out different sources; um, Jack Dillon was a source for me, I interviewed him and I looked at his materials. I heard about different people who had done things or who were related to what was going on, and I would call them, talk to them, and interview them, or look at whatever materials they had. And, um, interview various people. I went around to cemeteries to look at, um, carving styles. I, um, got involved with, uh, gravestone people, and did some, um, tours around cemeteries with them, talking about various, um, carvers, and the time period of the use of brownstone. And, um, looked into, uh, the architectural history of the country, and how the stone was being used, what styles were being used, the evolution of the style over time, and, um, the rise and fall of its use, and what were the, uh, um, reasons for that happening. And, um, looked into labor history, into Irish history, the history of Catholicism in Connecticut. Um, there were all kinds of things. When I curated an exhibit at the Connecticut River Museum, uh, that garnered more information from more people who allowed us to borrow things from their families and that gathered more stories from more people. And when I would go out and I would talk about brownstone there was always someone who would come up to me afterwards and say, you know, “my relative worked there,” and so that was another story that was added. And, um, now I’m looking into Native American uses for sandstone. So, I want that, uh, pre-contact use of the stone. ‘Cause most of what I’ve done is historic, post-contact.

(Her phone rings. We stop recording as she talks to her friend, and resume when she hangs up.)

LH: So, what have you learned about the Native American uses of sandstone?

Um, well, they used sandstone for, um, smoothing, because the sandstone, the grains of sand were good for smoothing things, and they would use that particularly on, um, arrows to scrape the bark off and make them smooth and aerodynamic, so sometimes you will find grooved, um, pieces of sandstone, and that’s what they did with it. Uh, occasionally, you’ll find sandstone used for other things, but not very often, so, I’m, um, I’m just starting out to find what might be used and it might be used as a hammerstone, but it’s not, um, a major resource for Native Americans, at least in this part of the country. In the western part of the United States, you’ve got, of course, the Native Americans in the Southwest that are living in the whole area of sandstone. That’s all that’s there. So there are some historic, not historic, sacred sites, petroglyphs, pictographs, different things that I’ve started to look into. Uh, with, um, the help of some people that I know in various parts of the country.

LH: So, I guess we were wondering how your, um, archaeology work that, like, your job fits in with your, um, interest in the sandstone, and, also, how the um, the work with the quarry housing by the road construction site is going.
Well, I haven’t been to Portland in quite a while. Um, I probably, maybe before the last time I got together with you, I think it was before that. So I haven’t been to Portland in quite a while because the last time I was there, it looked, pretty much, to me, like the project was… coming to completion and I did some surface collection and I didn’t find very much, so I didn’t figure there was much sense in going back there. So now, I’m trying to, um, catalog the, the things that I collected, and, uh, sort them and identify them, but it hasn’t been easy because there’s just so much of it. A lot of it is twentieth century, and nobody studies twentieth century artifacts, material culture, in any great detail. You can find more on sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth century, um, glassware and porcelain than you can, uh, twentieth century. So that’s um, that’s where I am with that project. So I still have a lot to do there. Hopefully I’ll finish that before Christmas because I have to get it out of the living room (chuckles).

LH: And do you think there’s possibilities for more archaeology having to do with the quarries or not in Portland and…

Uh, I think that there is some potential, uh, because that whole area was utilized. Um, the thing is, there’s been a lot of disturbance down there and, um, there’s a lot of waste material that probably is covering whatever you might find, so it would be a big project and I think probably, to go down through all that major riprap along the river you wouldn’t find much of anything and I know that some archaeologists have told the town that, but there’s always a potential. And there are some unusual things down there that I’ve found and um, should have some study done on, and um, now that the Hayes brothers have cleared away around the edge of the quarry there might be some potential for little things to be found. And I know that, that, the um, quarry workers often carved their initials into the walls, and a good time to go look for things like that is in the wintertime, when the quarries are frozen over and now that the, uh, all that excess vegetation is removed, that, that would be something to do that I haven’t done in a couple years.

LH: What kinds of unusual things have you found down there?

Uh, well, there are some remnants of some of the, uh, the derricks that were used. You can oftentimes find piece of the, um, wire, heavy-gauge wire that they used and a, a few other things, some of the mounting hooks that are drilled into the stone around the edges that there’s some of those, and there was some unusual thing that they found down there that, uh, nobody’s been able to figure out what it is. I think that the Hayes brothers keep it on display but nobody’s figured out what it could be. There are also some, uh, unusual, um, aspects to the area that were done by the industry. When you go down to the platform where the Hayes brothers have their main entrance, there’s a staircase that goes down into the, the quarries that’s mostly underwater now, but my suspicion is that that was an entrance from the Brainerd quarry office into the Brainerd quarry down those steps. And there are some other unusual kinds of things along the side of that promontory too that I have no idea what they were used for.

MH: Having, have done both, sort of, documentary research and archaeological work, um, how, how do you see those things fitting together? (unintelligible)

Well, even before I started working in archaeology, I had always encouraged the town to preserve whatever’s there and when they, uh, were beginning to consider the Hayes brothers’
proposal of their recreation park down there, I encouraged the town to have someone look into whatever material culture might be found down there while this was all going on and I don’t know that the town followed through on that, um, so – anything that was in the quarry, in the hole itself, I think has been pretty much removed at this point in time. They’ve been diving down there and I don’t think they’ve found anything. Um, my suspicion is that anything that might have survived that was metal of any kind went to be used during World War II or has rusted away.

*MH:* Um, let’s see...

*LH:* You were saying that when you, um, when you were curating this exhibit and when you’ve done talks about the quarries, people have come and said that their relatives worked in the quarry or they have some personal connection. How do you think that that sense of history fits into the, how people live in Portland? D- uh, are most people just ignorant of it?

Well, for a while, most people were ignorant of it. Um, I think that my continued work and showing up in Portland, periodically, keeps it in the forefront, and since the, uh, creation of the Brownstone Quorum, a group of Portland people who are interested in, in what’s going on related to the quarries, um, it’s more in, in the public eye, and, um, it could be better. I think that they could utilize this uniqueness in a better way than they have, and, um, uh, I will be chatting with some people about that soon. *(laughs)* I think that there’s a, a great potential for Portland to be able to, um, make a name for itself as the quarry town, as many small towns and other places have done. I don’t think they’re using their historic, um, aspects of the town to their fullest. They could do more and, um…

*LH:* How do you see your role in making that happen?

Well, I’m going to be getting together with some Portland residents soon *(laughing)* so we’ll be talking about some, some possibilities of what they can do. Um, when the, the, uh, quarries were designated as a National Historic Landmark, they began doing some things related to linking Main Street to the quarries and doing things around that, and I think that that’s, kind of maybe lost some steam. They had folks from the National Park Service come do a survey with them and start planning things like and, uh, I, I don’t think that they’ve gotten there yet. I think they’ve still got a ways to go. And I’m not sure that everybody in town has really bought into it. Uh, that’s an important thing when you’re working with a town, that you have to get the residents on board to buy into whatever’s going to happen, whether you’re doing your, um, Plan of Conservation and Development or changing your subdivision regulations or whatever, you have to include members of the community in the process so that, by the time you get to the end, everybody’s so involved in it that it’s accepted. And, um, I think that if the residents of Portland had a better idea of what they had, they would probably do more with it.

*LH:* So, do you see yourself as an educator about it, or are you just interested?

Yes, I’m an educator, um, that’s what I think of myself as, an educator, and, um, periodically I come to town and I talk to people and I do some more educating.
LH: I guess... um, part of what we want to do is, part of what we need to do for our project is to kind of give a short, not exactly a biography but a short of explanation of, um, your connection to the quarry and why we’re interviewing you. We have our ideas of why we want to interview you, but is there anything that you would want in that, like, how do you define... if you could just kind of sum up your relationship with the quarries, what would you focus on?

Oh, my relationship. That’s an interesting way of putting it. Um, I guess it is a relationship because I’ve been interested in this subject for a long time now and whenever I’m anywhere, there’s the potential for this subject matter to be there, whether I’m traveling in New York City and visiting a museum and walking down the street and finding a brownstone where I never knew there was one before or I’m in a foreign country where they’ve used the same material for construction of a building, and, “Well, there it is again!” Um, it’s, it’s basically a part of me and I’ve talked to people all over about this subject. Um, I have provided information for other researchers and they have provided information with me, we’ve collaborated, we’ve talked about it, um, I’ve talked about it with folks who’ve come here to visit the quarries for one reason or another: their relative worked in the quarries, they’re researching a building, uh, um, or something related to that, and it seems to permeate everything.

LH: Do you think that, if you hadn’t been a grad student at Wesleyan who was kind of asked to do this project, if you would’ve found something else that would be like that? Or, what do you think, how do you think it would be if you had never done the project?

Well, I’ve done projects in other areas, on other subjects that I’ve found interesting as well, so, um, this particular one happens to be it but I have interests in other areas too that I’ve researched and looked into and, um, I’ve studied, uh, ecology and various aspects of that and researched, um, the life history of the beaver and various things related to that animal. I’ve looked into the use of, uh, um, shells by Native Americans to make wampum, I researched that. I’m interested in the use of natural resources and what people do with them and where they do it and... things like that. So if not brownstone, it would’ve been something else, I’m sure.

LH: Thank you so much.

MH: Thank you very much.

So can I ask you guys some questions?

LH: Yeah.

Um, what exactly do you have to do for your project in this class?

MH: I think I’ve got it down...

LH: You think you’ve got it down? (laughs)

MH: This has actually been an area of some discussion in the classroom. (laughs)
I mean, you’re gathering all this information from other people, but what’s your role in this?

MH: We have to, um, we start by transcribing, um, the interviews. We go through the sort of preliminary process, and then that’s going to, one, get handed in to our professor and get added to Special Collections and the Portland Historical Society and the Middlesex Historical Society. And in addition to that, there’s going to be a, sort of, a version of the interviews made into a more cohesive narrative, um, sort of compressed down.

And who’s going to do that?

MH: That’s going to be us.

LH: That’s a big part of what we need to do.

MH: Yeah, that’s sort of a chunk of it, along with, we, we have to write a sort of a reflective piece and talk about the process.

LH: And for making the narrative, what we’re calling the narrative, um, we’ve been reading a lot of Studs Terkel this semester, and it’s not necessarily... it doesn’t necessarily have to be in his style, but we’ve been talking about, like, sometimes he includes what questions he’s asking and sometimes he doesn’t and it’s just like, “Oh, here’s this thing that this person said” and you have no idea how much he moved things around or what he cut out. So we’ve been talking a lot about the issues with that. And I guess, we haven’t, the two of us haven’t...

MH: Yeah, we haven’t sat down and worked through it yet, but

LH: ...what we want to do with that. So that’s one of the things, and...

MH: We have to do a public presentation, which is what we gave you, which will be 15...

LH: Fifteen or twenty minutes.

Now is everybody doing each one of those presentations?

LH: No, we’re doing the one in – there are two groups doing the one in Portland and two in Middletown, and three on the radio.

OK, so if I wanna specifically see you two, I hafta go on the tenth.

LH: Yeah

And if I want to see other folks, they’ll be on the fifteenth and the eleventh.

MH: Mm hmm.
LH: Yep, and uh, it looks like probably the other group presenting in Portland is the group interviewing Bob McDougall, right? It’s Michelle and Emmy and...

MH: Yeah

LH: Yeah. Ok. So, um, but then...

MH: And that’s gonna be sort of, an even shorter version of, of, of the... to kind of get the main points across.

LH: So we’ll be talking about what we did and also playing clips from the interviews.

OK.

LH: um... We’ve been spending the last couple of class periods going “Wait, so we turn what in to who?” (laughs) Very confused. But, um...

And so, they, you’ve got Bob and you’ve got Jack and you’ve got me and who else are you interviewing?

MH: There’s the...

LH: Mike Meehan.

Oh, Mike, right.

LH: Uh,

MH: We’re also interviewing Christoph Henning, who is Mike Meehan’s on-site stone-carver.

Oh is he back?

MH: He’s around.

LH: So we’re interviewing him as well.

MH: Is there anyone else.

LH: Yeah. Who’s...

MH: There’s two other groups I think.

LH: Who is, are Sam and Rosa interviewing? Rhea and Shay are interviewing Jean Dillworth, I think, and I’m not entirely clear who that is.

Ok.
LH: But who are Rosa and Sam...?

So, basically, the only person that you are interviewing that really has any firsthand relation to the quarries is Jack, and when Jack’s gone... that’s, that’s, well Jack has passed his stuff along to his children, but, um, as far as, you know, being closest to the information, Jack’s getting to be one of the last people. It’s troubling to me. One of the reasons why I’ve been interviewing my father, I’ve been doing this too, and there’s a sense of urgency related to that. And I don’t think that, um, I don’t think it’s a characteristic of Americans to understand that sense of urgency, of knowing your past or getting it recorded and having it there to, to look at later on, like in European countries, for example. Information is passed on, or Native Americans who have that oral tradition and passed it on to the new generation so it doesn’t get lost. And, um, you know, that loss, not only of the person, but of the subject matter that we’re talking about, the quarries... the town almost lost that site. So, um, the sense of urgency for me to is that I’m getting older. So, now we’re passing the baton, so to speak.

LH: Our teacher was telling us that, um, National Public Radio is sponsoring a National Day of Listening, where they’re trying to get everyone to interview and talk to people in their, like older members of their families on, I think it’s the Saturday after Thanksgiving.

Well, you know, they’ve been doing that Oral History Corps thing for a long time now, yeah, and, um, I think that that’s helped to bring some awareness to people but, uh, I still think that there’s so much, when we talk about a thousand World War II vets dying every day, I mean, that’s incredible history disappearing. So... I feel a sense of urgency. So you guys will be the storytellers.

(all laugh)

LH: We’ll try.

So you know how to get in touch with me.

LH: We’ll send you the transcripts in a couple of days.

OK
In the Fall term of 2009, the English Department of Wesleyan University is offering a course titled “Oral Histories and the Portland Brownstone Quarry” (English 274). It is supported by the Service-Learning Initiative of the Wesleyan Service-Learning Center.

The course has a twofold objective: first, to educate enrolled students about a significant feature in local history—Portland’s brownstone quarries—that has played a large part in the development of this region, and even as far as New York, Boston, and San Francisco. This industry influenced urban planning and development, and had a great impact on architecture and aesthetics. Closer to home, the presence of the quarries shaped the development of our local towns and industries, including Middletown and Wesleyan University. The second objective grows out of the recognition that history is found, not only in textbooks, but in the memories and stories of the people. Consequently, students seek to interview selected people, Portland residents or those with some connection to the town and its quarries, in order to produce a history of the important relationship between the town and this great geological feature.

During this Fall term 2009, students will learn in the classroom and in practice about the quarries and about the methods and aims of oral histories. Interviews, consisting of usually no more than three separate meetings, will be conducted by two or three students, using either a tape recorder or a videocamera. Interviewees may, of course, choose not to be videotaped, if they desire. The interviews will be transcribed, discussed with the interviewee, and the students will then work to produce a final project. This will consist of a written document, accompanied by an audio- or videotape where applicable. The final projects, it is hoped, will contribute to the local history archives of Portland, Middletown, and Wesleyan University. To that end, copies will be presented to the Portland Historical Society, the Middlesex County Historical Society, and to Special Collections of Wesleyan University’s Olin Library. There will also be a public presentation of the final projects at the end of the course.

Sincerely,

Professor Indira Karamcheti
English Department
Wesleyan University
Middletown, CT 06459
(860) 685-3625
I have tape/video recorded an interview for English 274, "Oral Histories and the Portland Brownstone Quarry," a course offered by Wesleyan University in the fall term of 2009. I have set forth my observations, memories, and experiences surrounding the Brownstone quarries of Portland, CT.

I hereby give and grant to Wesleyan University, or anyone authorized by them, the absolute and unqualified right to the use of this tape/video recorded interview for such scholarly and educational purposes as they shall determine.

It is expressly understood that the full literary rights of this interview pass to Wesleyan University, and that no rights whatsoever are to vest in my heirs now or at my death.

I hereby release and discharge Wesleyan University from any and all claims and demands arising out of, or in connection with, the use of such observations, memories and experiences concerning Portland and the Brownstone quarries, including, but not limited to, any and all claims of libel, slander, and invasion of privacy.

I understand this does not preclude any use I would want to make of the material therein.

Narrator name and address (please print)  

Alison C. Guinness  
418 Tabor Hill Rd, East Haddam, CT 06423

Signature  

Alison C. Guinness  
Date 11/20/09

Interviewer name and address (please print)  

C. Morgan Harness  
165 Wood Ave, Watertown, CT 06795

Laura Heath - 264 Taylor Ave, Easton, PA 18042

Signature  

Laura & Heath  
Date 11/20/09

C. Morgan Harness  
(11/20/09)