

# **Verna Small**

An Oral History Interview  
Conducted for the GVSHP Preservation Archives  
by  
Vicki Weiner

New York, New York

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## ABSTRACT

Verna Small (born 1916) is one of Greenwich Village's preservation pioneers and helped lead the successful campaign in the late 1960s to create the Greenwich Village Historic District. She begins this interview by discussing her love of historic buildings and restoration of her own home after her family moved to Greenwich Village in the 1940s.

From there, Small talks about the events which drew her into broader community preservation matters in the 1960s. In this section of the interview, Small reminisces about Alan Weinberg and the creation of the Association of Greenwich Village Homeowners, as well as the passage of New York City's Landmarks Law in 1965. Individuals mentioned include Mary Nichols, of the *Village Voice*, and Ruth and Philip Wittenberg.

Small continues the interview by discussing the creation of the Greenwich Village District Council in 1966 and the challenges it faced in its efforts to create a unified historic district in the Village. These challenges included a competing plan to create 18 separate districts. Small explains how the boundaries of the Greenwich Village Historic District were established in 1969 and opines on why the Village waterfront was not included.

Small concludes the interview by discussing her work after the creation of the historic district. These activities included her substantial work on the landmarks committee of Manhattan's Community Board 2, as well as her efforts to encourage historic preservation in SoHo and establish a Greenwich Village Historic Waterfront District.

INTERVIEWEE: Verna Small  
INTERVIEWER: Vicki Weiner  
LOCATION: New York, New York  
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TRANSCRIBERS: Jane King, Susan De Vries, Kimberly Stahlman Kearns

WEINER: This is a May 15, 1996 interview with Verna Small by Vicki Weiner.  
[Addresses Small:] What I've done is I've written some questions, and they're split into four categories.

SMALL: Well, why don't we use those as points of departure?

WEINER: Exactly.

SMALL: Then if we get stuck with them, stop the machine while I look.

WEINER: The first section I was curious about was you as a preservationist. I wondered if there was anything in your background that led you to become a preservationist. Anything in your childhood or early adulthood prior to the fifties and sixties that led to a career in preservation.

SMALL: Well, sometimes I feel that I grew up in a museum. That may have something to do with it. [Chuckles]

My father was acutely interested in beautiful objects and very aware of the importance of having them around you, not only where you live but also where you went to the library and it'd be nice if the school had a few, too. He was concerned about that. And I had a mother who was absolutely passionate about houses. Just houses. It really is a kind of security matter. She believed, as she would always say, "in bricks and mortar." And that became a kind of a symbol. So I always looked at houses, what were they like. I can remember as a child being interested in the

varieties of brick that I saw in the city of Washington. I found Roman brick that was only about half as high as one of those standard bricks. That interested me as a child.

Of course, growing up in the city of Washington probably had a lot to do with it. Because when I was a child the city classic center, the triangle, was being built, was actually being created. Well, I saw the transformation of a big space, the mall space in Washington, from a place where we went to market to a place where the classical revival buildings were borrowed from Chicago and put in. And I knew about that for some reason.

WEINER: So you were aware of it.

SMALL: I was aware of it. I think Washington is a place where, if you are aware of the effect of space on you and drive around it—even as a child—you see, “Oh, this is avenue is pretty because of the way it goes into that avenue.” It’s a city that makes you aware of what’s happening around you spatially.

WEINER: When did you move to the Village?

SMALL: I signed my first lease in the Village, I think it was January 1, 1941, but I had an apartment in those years because I was assigned here from a federal job that I had and I found a Village apartment which I leased. So, I’m more than fifty years a Villager.

WEINER: What pivotal event, if there was one, drew you into the struggle to preserve the Village?

SMALL: Well, I think (it wasn’t a pivotal event) by the time that the 1950s were drawing to an end, my little boy, David, was getting old enough not to require

constant attention. He started school. The neighborhood churning with such troubles were occasioned by the new charter [of New York City]. The new charter was going to change the zoning and old houses were being taken down overnight to have buildings erected on corners that would be six stories high and cover the whole damn lot. So that by the time I was having more leisure, the neighborhood was having more need for people to pay attention to what was happening to it. That coincidence in the late fifties, when the Village had to be saved, was the turning point.

WEINER: And how would you characterize the other people who were also becoming interested in preserving the Village?

SMALL: Oh, they were giants in those days. And the main one, of course, who had always been interested in gardens was Ruth Wittenberg. And she was really churned up, and then the library struggle had started and Margot Gayle and others became active in mustering the energy around that symbol.<sup>1</sup>

The other thing that was happening by 1961 was that we had bought a house. Which was a wonderful thing. And a beautiful house. We had lived in an interesting building for 14 years—an 1850s building right on Sixth Avenue with a hardware store downstairs and three dwelling floors above. I had got interested in that during the years that we had rented that from the Rhinelander Real Estate Company because it had glorious surviving hardware but no central heat, no plumbing because it had all been ripped out because the upper floors had been used as a factory during these times....

This space became possible for us as a place to live when we came back from the war, the Second World War, needed a space to live, couldn't find it, found space that we were allowed by the Rhinelander Real Estate Company to put in a little

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<sup>1</sup> This is the Jefferson Market Courthouse, which was saved by Gayle and others in the early 1960s. By the end of the decade it had been transformed into a branch of the New York Public Library.

bathroom and a little kitchen. We did it all ourselves, which we did, and found beautiful fireplaces, magnificent dimensions; [it was] really noble space that had been created by German immigrants and merchants who wanted their businesses downstairs and their houses above—something as a Washingtonian I don't think I had never heard of. [Laughs] Although I now know when I go back and I look around, I see buildings in Georgetown that are Federal, or what I now know to be Greek Revival buildings, with stores downstairs and dwellings upstairs. It's not something that had ever penetrated my head.

WEINER: And it appealed to you?

SMALL: Well, it appealed to me because it was a roof and a roof was definitely necessary. [Chuckles] I have to say that the first day we saw it we said, "Oh, gee, thanks but no thanks," and then a month later we came back and just said "Thanks." [Laughs]

WEINER: And started to work.

SMALL: And started to work. And we learned to do everything. We learned to plaster and re-plaster and to lay bricks and to use muriatic acid. There was more muriatic acid used in those years.

WEINER: What is that?

SMALL: It's something to clean plaster off of brick walls and the whole Village had its brick walls stripped in those days....

The coincidence is, as I say, neighborhood action need for public activity happened to coincide. Now, the homeowners were very important, too. Another

great figure that I certainly would like to have remembered, a professor of planning at New York University whose name was—

WEINER: He was with the Association of Greenwich Village Homeowners?

SMALL: He had the idea of creating it, and he persuaded some of us to get it started. He lived himself in a house that I think he owned. Weinberg was his name. And Professor Weinberg lived on Washington Square North in a house which he has since given to NYU.

WEINER: Is he still living?

SMALL: No. He's departed. But he had the idea of the Homeowners Association.

WEINER: What year was that?

SMALL: That was 1961. And Geraldine Mindel was persuaded by him to start it. She was a resident of a beautiful house on 9th Street, and she did so. It was his wisdom to perceive that people who had committed their personal lives as well as their money to the neighborhood would have more clout in civic matters.... That was a great idea and it flourished.

WEINER: So the people in the Association were—

SMALL: We immediately went into preservation. We just swiftly, swiftly went in.

WEINER: I want to turn now to the landmarks law and talk a little bit about that.

SMALL: Mmmm hmmm.

WEINER: Before the passing of the law [in 1965] what was the interaction between Village preservationists and preservationists in other communities?

SMALL: Well, it was very important. It seems to me that every recollection that I have credits a group of lawyers with the conception of the law, with the floating of the law. Lawyers from Brooklyn Heights, lawyers from Staten Island and Philip Wittenberg here—who was himself an attorney, although not particularly concerned with real property; he was more concerned with publication law. But he and his wife, Ruth, were very aware of the individual leaders in Brooklyn and in Staten Island.

WEINER: So, they were kind of the connection?

SMALL: They were the link. I hope that you have—Mary Nichols was interviewing Ruth before she died, and she may have some tapes. Perhaps she can give them to you.

WEINER: She hasn't yet, but she has mentioned them. And Tony Wood interviewed Ruth also.

SMALL: He did? Well, so you have that—you have her fierce, wonderful energy recorded. She was indeed the link through her husband and through her own energy and sheer social charm, among other things, to the other groups. We never worked without them, you see. We perceived that their cause was our cause and

they were a little bit ahead. And because we didn't have an organization that's how Ruth and I got the idea that what we needed was not a new organization but a coalition of the existing organizations....

WEINER: Out of the smaller groups?

SMALL: That's right.

WEINER: What other groups were active in the Village at that time?

SMALL: Well, the Greenwich Village Society, actually, was the main overall one and it tended to center at Greenwich House. And then there was the Children's Aid Society, where the people whose concern was for the children. But you see there was a kind of gap, because while there was the infant nascent Community Board in Manhattan that wasn't really very powerful and it wasn't duplicated outside of Manhattan. There were maybe a few districts in Manhattan. I forget how many. Not as many as there are now.

WEINER: That had community boards?

SMALL: That had community boards. And this had been the idea of Wagner. He had been the City Planning Director. So that little infant organization existed. The old, traditional settlement house-oriented organizations existed. The Homeowners was a great idea and *very much needed*. And Ruth found it hard to accept that, but ultimately she did accept that she should be in the Homeowners. It took a while.

WEINER: Really?

SMALL: Yeah. She didn't see quite the virtue of that.

WEINER: Of a group like that?

SMALL: Uh huh.

WEINER: She was more interested in solo working?

SMALL: I don't know what got into her. [Laughs] But whatever it was it kept her active.

WEINER: So she eventually joined forces?

SMALL: She commandeered me. One of her gifts, you see, was to get younger people revved-up. [Begins reviewing documents.] I'm looking to see if I can find in this batch of papers one of our announcements. [Reads from one document:] "Member organizations in the Village Districts Council." It says, "Association of Village Homeowners, The Committee for the Jefferson Market Library, Community Planning Board #2 Manhattan, the Greenwich Village Association, Village Independent Democrats, the Washington Square Association as of 1969, and the West Village Committee." These were the ones that became federated, coordinated into our council, into the Greenwich Village Historic District Council.

WEINER: What year did that Council come together? I have in my notes that it came into being in 1966.

SMALL: Well, it may have started then. By '69 we were really thanking people....

WEINER: So, actually, the Council was created after the landmarks law was passed?

SMALL: Yeah. We must have had the law and created the Council only for the designation of the district.

WEINER: Before the Council and before the law, was there interaction between the Mayoral appointed pre-law commission and the Village?

SMALL: Oh, yes. Oh, dear me.

WEINER: What was that interaction like?

SMALL: That was wonderful. That was our connection with blessed Professor James Grote Van Derpool. He operated in dismal quarters down on Broadway where we used to go and help him. And about four-thirty every afternoon he would produce a box of cookies and a little pot of tea, and he would say, "You must stop, you must sit down. We must have it. It saves lives. Tea saved lives." He was a wonderful, wonderful man, and we worked with him and wrote for him and listened to him, etcetera, etcetera.

WEINER: Working toward the law or was this working for—?

SMALL: It was working first toward the law and then once we'd got the law, beginning to work on the designation.

WEINER: Was this when the Village Research Committee was formed? I have notes about—

SMALL: Now that's something that Claire Tankel knows a great deal more about.... Because there was an effort to muster the professionals on the planning side in this way and then there were suits which came. A real estate man named Leo Callarco, who was a very good citizen and loved the Village but thought this was going to be the end of all profit-making in the Village fought like a steer and sued. So we had these things to deal with....

WEINER: And was Alan Burnham involved?

SMALL: Alan Burnham was indeed involved. We used to work with him, especially in connection with writing....

WEINER: Did you attend the hearings on the law?

SMALL: Oh, yes.

WEINER: Do you remember anything about the hearing of December of 1964? Because from accounts I've heard and read, the 1964 draft of the law didn't go anywhere.

SMALL: You know what? We have to find—and perhaps you have that—that history was brilliantly recapitulated by Christabel Gough in *The Village Views* and that's where we can get it, and I would have to look at that to refresh my memory.

WEINER: I would love to hear what your remembrances are.

SMALL: I'll try to reread that, but I don't think I can get that together to say anything cogent about it right now....

WEINER: Well okay. Maybe we'll just move on. Once the law was passed, what was the attitude of the Village?

SMALL: The attitude of the Village was "We've got to catch up with Brooklyn Heights." [Laughs]

WEINER: Really?

SMALL: Yeah, sure. "We've got to be protected because—" And there was urgency and I want to talk about the urgency, because the immediate reaction to possibilities for profit was very clear as soon as the new charter, the Charter of '61, put a stop to this total lot coverage of buildings and six story buildings on the corners of blocks. So many Village corners were a loss because the impending law actually motivated the erection of buildings that exploited the extant situation. And that's during the time when Save the Village was very much up....

WEINER: So people trying to get their demolition in before—?

SMALL: Demolition in before the changes which would be more restrictive and more limiting. First, the charter change in the new zoning had been doing it, and then the threat that it was going to be landmarked had certain effects. So that everybody operated with a sense of urgency to get the Village designated....

WEINER: Once the law was enacted in December of 1965 there was a hearing about the Village. What were the dynamics there?

SMALL: Oh, the dynamics there were to try to answer the contentions of Callarco, et. al, who felt that these restrictions would be, to use the expression, a "taking" and so we all announced how that wasn't so and people stood up and

testified: me, Ruth, and so on. And we had pictures made.... They're great big pictures. And in the last hearing we got our congressman, Edward I. Koch, to stand up and hold the pictures in the hearing. And that's my most vivid, graphic memory.

WEINER: And who was testifying while he held the pictures?

SMALL: Everybody would come and talk about different buildings. Alfred Levi testified, I'm sure Ruth testified. But whenever we could we would get the owners of the buildings to do it and to an astonishing degree, they did. However, there was always an active—not always a Village voice—but a potential developer from outside was always in the wings and especially as it affected the West Village.

WEINER: And those people came to the hearings?

SMALL: And those people came to the hearings or sent representatives, and they were lively. [Chuckles] The hearings were lively.... I think that the old Board of Estimate room is in all of our memories. There must be 100 people alive in Manhattan and Brooklyn and Staten Island today who feel the memory of the dignity, the beauty, the grace of that space. It almost made us feel “We want to keep the things in the city that are related to *this place*.” I really felt that....

WEINER: It must have inspired beautiful testimony.

SMALL: Oh, the testimony was spirited and it was excellent. There was crying.

WEINER: I can imagine. Now all the groups that were unified as the Greenwich Village Historic District Council—

SMALL: They came or they sent people or they sent letters.

WEINER: So they were very unified?

SMALL: That group was extraordinarily unified. I don't know how we did it. I guess we did it because the issue did it. And also because of Ruth's extraordinary energy. I didn't have any extraordinary energy but I had the gift of gab and put it to the service of the written word.

WEINER: Were there any efforts to talk to the developers or to try to educate them in any way outside of the hearings? Was there any interaction with the "enemy"?

SMALL: Zeckendorfs and so on? That was done mostly by the West Village people where the immediate issue was focused. Perhaps if you—you've interviewed Bill Bowser, I'm sure.

WEINER: No, we haven't. Not yet. He's on our list of people we'd loved to talk to.... He was very active?

SMALL: No, he wasn't. He hadn't quite come to flower then, but he is in touch with the people who were. Now, Jane Jacobs was very much in the saddle at that time in the West Village, and she went with Ruth and me to argue against the eighteen districts.

WEINER: Now I wanted to talk about that. How did the idea of the eighteen districts come about?

SMALL: I wish I knew....

WEINER: So suddenly there was this proposal for eighteen districts?

SMALL: Maybe if you could get to Jane, she would know. Or maybe Mary Nichols would know where that came from because she was operating as a journalist then. She had young children, and so on, but she was operating as a journalist. Journalists, I discovered by listening to her, knew more than we did. Well, that's always true.

WEINER: Takes a lot of phone calls and investigating.

SMALL: And going and sitting in people's offices. So that's it. You raised a very good question. I don't know where that came from but it was a genuine bad idea, and I must say that I'm proud that we saw its danger. We saw how those intervals—unprotected intervals—would bask in the amenities protected by the law and then self-escape from it and so wall in the little spots that their grace and charm end. It's happening anyway. That's why we have to be very careful not to have those little spots on the waterfront, if we can help it, we have to have it contiguous, contiguous, contiguous even if they can have separate names.

WEINER: Once the eighteen districts was on the agenda, how did you keep the idea of a big district?

SMALL: We went down and raised hell!

WEINER: [Laughs] Describe that to me.

SMALL: Well, we went down and made our case. At first we sounded very rationally. And I think it was Geoffrey Platt who remarked afterward that Mrs. Wittenberg shouted and Mrs. Small cried and he was overcome. [Laughs]

WEINER: [Laughs] So the two of you were—

SMALL: Yes. And Jane.

WEINER: And Jane?

SMALL: The three of us. I didn't cry. I probably looked like I was going to cry.

WEINER: You were just very sad. And Jane?

SMALL: Well, she said that it's our problem. We all said the same thing really.

WEINER: But there was that personal contact.

SMALL: Yes, and it was a very stormy meeting. And we didn't know that we had won. Of course, that may not have been the occasion, but something else all together. It is a powerful thing, that one caused a change, because a change is a phenomenon that's multi-determined like any other phenomenon. So something made it happen.

WEINER: How long was the idea of the eighteen districts lying about? That would be 1966, was that? Who was Henry Chisolm [sic]? That name pops up.

SMALL: Chisolm was a real estate person around here, and I think he was opposed. But I can't call up to mind his face. There is a man still alive from that generation whose name is Sam Benjamin [who] you might try to talk to....

WEINER: Also a real estate person?

SMALL: Also a real estate person. He belonged to the real estate firm called Handfield, Gruen and Venture [sic?]. Does the name Dewey Handfield come to you as a big property owner in the Village? He has died and so has his wife, so that won't help. But, Sam Benjamin was a partner in the firm after designation. Sam lives on St. Luke's Place, and he is a man of a certain age and a considerable length of root in the Village, and he might remember the attitude of the real estate industry much better than we do.

We just thought they were the devil incarnate, you know. And afterward, I had to use the Handfield organization to manage my own house. [Chuckles] But that didn't last, because they went into different businesses. Management of houses was not the profitable business then.

WEINER: I wouldn't think so. Once Mr. Platt's mind was changed by the persuasion—

SMALL: Maybe he was himself always persuaded. How do we know?

WEINER: That's true.

SMALL: He could tell his charming story, say that you know that the ladies came and made a good case.

WEINER: Right. He had a good reason now for going public with that.

SMALL: It's very possible, he could have always—

WEINER: Did you feel that he was sympathetic all along?

SMALL: I wasn't that swift. [Laughs] I was frightened.

WEINER: Why?

SMALL: I was terrified by the idea that this might prevail....

WEINER: There was this definite sense of urgency. When the idea of the big district was agreed upon by the Commission, how did the boundary get decided?

SMALL: Ah, well, that was where Regina's [Regina Kellerman's] information gets involved, just because she was then employed by the Commission. And she can tell you about the hemming and hawing about the boundaries. And I think that the process of how you do the boundaries has evolved over time, and I truly can't remember. I do remember how terribly we felt. I have here [a letter] from Jane, (which you undoubtedly have a copy of, because I've given it to everybody) to the Commission about why the waterfront should be included. You have that I'm sure.

WEINER: How did it get cut out? Do you have any recollection of why or how that happened?

SMALL: I can't tell you that. And again Jane and possibly, at least the legend about it, can come to you from Bill Bowser. But, you see, the West Village was then very engaged in the pragmatic things. It involved demolition. It was the creation of the West Village Housing. And so there may not have been the implacable insistence of driving the protection of the waterfront because that might have been—it never occurred to me until this moment that that might have been a factor in this situation.

WEINER: From the city's point of view?

SMALL: No. From the point of view of the West Village people. I cannot remember that it figured in any discussion that Ruth or I or anybody had had with any of the personnel involved. But it now occurs to me that the terrible struggle that the West Village people had—which was tragedy because with every passing year that they couldn't get the city's permission to proceed they had to sacrifice some amenity in their architecture. So they ended up with those flat, vernacular, utilitarian facades which originally had had sills and lintels and various graceful things that related them more than the scale, the surviving scale of the fabric—relates them to the best streets of the Village. But they *lost* the detail fighting the developers....

WEINER: So the community, or the groups that you worked with, the homeowners and the District Council, were not involved in the creation of the boundary of the big district?

SMALL: It was mostly a staff function.... We wouldn't have known how to do it. We wouldn't have even known how to argue for it. We were just—and Regina [Kellerman] knows about this and I'm sure you've discussed this with her—she persuaded us to be for as big a one as possible, and our wish was for as big as possible, and she would have had it right down to the whole boundaries of the whole of the Community Board district and she would have been right....

So the naive expression of the Council was, "As much as possible, as all embracing as possible." And very particularly we cared about certain things and these Regina had emphasized: those little houses over around 4th Street and so on which somehow got excised. And, of course, it was a great wish to go south of the Square, but there was opposition, I'm sure, from the university [NYU]. Although that was never open. Never to my knowledge. I didn't ever see somebody come down and say, "You can't develop."

WEINER: So it was sort of in the air?

SMALL: I would think so. One wonders why it was so implacable that it ended there. When we tried to get this side of the street included, and McDougal Street, that was stopped.

WEINER: You kind of negotiated, nipped and tucked.

SMALL: Nipped and tucked. And the nipping and tucking was really hard. And this house and the house next door—but not the little ones around the corner and not the corner building, were nominated individually but not sustained. This side of the street was in danger. Now there's an interesting thing. That's one example of how the building boundaries have evolved over time. We now know, from the tragic thing that happened on the west side of West Broadway in SoHo, the cast iron historic district, that's the side that's out, and the other side was in. We know that it's a mistake to do that if it can possibly be avoided. The line should be along backyards and not in the middle of streets, *if ever possible*. And of course, there's so many little treasures south of 4th Street and west of Seventh Avenue that aren't in....

WEINER: Once the designation happened, did you feel satisfied?

SMALL: Oh, I tell you I think we floated.

WEINER: How was it celebrated?

SMALL: Well we had parties, I remember. We had wonderful parties at Ruth's wonderful house. Did you ever get in that house?

WEINER: No.... So there were parties. There was a general good feeling.

SMALL: Oh my, yes!

WEINER: What about the committees that were working toward a district? What happened to the Council at the time [after the designation occurred]?

SMALL: The Council went up in smoke and everybody went home to their—let's see. 1971? [Reviews documents.] Oh, here's something. This is from me to the Commission. '71. [Reads:] "Organizations of the Greenwich Village area of Manhattan concerned with preservation matters. Two separate organizations worked on the three historic districts of our area. One was Community Board 2, Manhattan Borough President, this operates under local law.... Its members are Richard Barnett, Ed Koch.... James Shaw and Ruth Wittenberg. The Association of Village Homeowners, made up of families who live in properties they own in the several communities of the district. Members are Mr. Epps, one of the Library of the Union, Professor Bard...."

WEINER: How was Bard?

SMALL: Lovely. Wonderful—lovely, lovely man. [Continues reading:] "In addition, the Charlton-King-Vandam Historic District has a landmarks group headed by Mrs. Ralph Baxter." She became an attorney at law.

WEINER: And the Third District is the Sullivan-MacDougal Gardens?

SMALL: Yeah, that's right. At that time, SoHo, we were still working on in '71.

WEINER: And did some of the groups that were working on the Village Historic District, did they turn their attentions to SoHo or to—?

SMALL: No. Only the Community Board went on and the Village Independent Democrats I think to some extent went on. The Washington Square Association did not. The West Village Committee did not. The Committee for the Jefferson Library did not. And the Homeowners [Association] did not. And I don't think that SoHo has ever developed a co-op owners association down there.

WEINER: Not that I know of.

SMALL: In fact, I had a terrible time during the seventies and early eighties getting anybody from SoHo to turn their hand. They said they didn't like committee work; they're all creative....

WEINER: Many of the people working on the committees in the Council ended up on the Community Board. How did that come about? Or they were already on the Community Board when—

SMALL: They were already on I think. They were all Community-niks, you know. They became more so....

[End of Tape, Side 1]

WEINER: After the designation and the shifting of agendas in the groups, what in your thinking became of the preservation community of the Village? Was there some sort of shift?

SMALL: I think that the Homeowners Association and the Community Board tipped it into our loving hands. [Pulls out a document.] Here's something from 1969. [Reads:] "In a concurrent statement to the Commission Mrs. Small and Mrs. Ruth Wittenberg, co-chairman of Greenwich Village Historic District"—we were keeping it alive, I guess—"said that the quicky aluminum storefront and modern windows with brick sills recently installed really would set a disastrous precedent if allowed to remain." So we began to testify, and we continued, the Community Board continued monthly testimony—what I call "the worm's eye view" of preservation, and I did it for many decades.

WEINER: And you became the Chair of the Landmarks Committee [of the Community Board]?

SMALL: Yeah, and then I resigned so Ruth could be and then I took it back when she resigned.

WEINER: So you kept, really, back where the—

SMALL: The link was the continuous activity, really, of people.

WEINER: And also, the maintenance of the District became—

SMALL: Went into the hands of the Community Board and the homeowners. The homeowners could do it and pay for it to a very considerable extent and the Community Board to fight for it month after month after month. We were, with the exception of Brooklyn—Brooklyn Heights, and the Community Board of that area—we were for many years, the *only* Community Board that did it.

WEINER: That testified.

SMALL: Yeah. Monthly.

WEINER: Well certainly this Community Board has a reputation. I mean Jennifer Raab [chairwoman of the Landmarks Preservation Committee in the 1990s], when I first met her, knew all about Community Board 2 and their testimony, their history of testimony....

What was the relationship with the Commission after designation?

SMALL: Lovely. Always lovely. It really was, for years. Now there's nobody who remembers the early days, as I'm sure you know. I'm regarded as a relic.  
[Chuckles]

WEINER: Do you recall feeling at any point that that had changed? When did you first become aware of the difference?

SMALL: I would say the difference has persisted until the last couple of years. I mean we felt welcomed as cooperators, and appreciated and supported. I don't say we aren't appreciated now, but there is not the sense of shared memory because I think the last Commissioner who was on at almost the beginning retired a couple of years ago. Then the administration changed. This is all the passage of time. The whole business of institutional memory is a real one....

Oh, when the Commission ended up administratively within the Parks Department. Did you remember that that happened?

WEINER: No.... And how long ago was that?

SMALL: Let's see.... [Reviews documents.] Ah! [Finds map among papers.]

WEINER: There it is. The evil map. I've seen this. It just staggers the mind.

SMALL: I had almost forgotten it. The map of the eighteen horrors. How to ensure the district—

WEINER: "December 1966" it says. We need to find out who was responsible for creating it. I would really like to—

SMALL: Regina will know, I think. She might have quit by then. I don't remember what happened.... She went to school, I think.

WEINER: Right. She went to Columbia.

SMALL: Well, she went to some place in Pennsylvania first. She taught at Columbia but she got her degree some place else....

Well now, you've got more questions?

WEINER: I actually have a couple more. One of my questions was about Carmine DeSapio and what went on between Carmine DeSapio and the Community Board. Because that's an area I haven't had a chance to talk to Mary Nichols about that yet.

SMALL: It's not one that I am familiar with. I was in the Village Independent Democrats from the beginning, and we felt that it was time to really fight that party. But I was young and naive and inexperienced and probably didn't even help them very much....

WEINER: And then the creation of the West Village Houses. Were you really involved with the West Village Committee while they were working on that?

SMALL: I was certainly very much in favor of what they were doing, very much involved in having the homeowners, to the extent that they did anything, not do anything that would interfere with that. I really believed in that. I really believed that there needed to be development for young beginning families over there that would replace the buildings. The buildings that came down for that, some of them were dwellings but many of them were old commercial things. I really felt that they were on the path to righteousness, but they were their own power source.... They were certainly supported by everybody that I was part of, but nobody ever asked me to write anything for them or to do any active things because they had their own activists.

WEINER: And was Phil Dowser involved with that?

SMALL: I think he was coming along then but I don't think he had become quite so active.... I'm trying to think of when I first became aware of Phil Dowser and I really can't tell you. But I first became aware of him, not as an activist but as somebody that I enormously respected that worked with the garden [Jefferson Market Garden?]. Putting his back where he spoke. I mean physically he got the shovel and planted the bush and did these things. I've always had an enormous respect for him for doing that—for really doing it himself. But I feel that he didn't emerge as a leader as early as Jane [Jacobs]. And there was a wonderful woman named Rachele Wall who was a chair for the committee, who is now still alive I believe.... She was a brilliant leader of the day, just brilliant.

WEINER: Did she lead that group during the time of the West Village Housing?

SMALL: There's another person you should talk to: Arthur Stonewall. Arthur Stonewall was an engineer and a home-owner on Jane Street, and he and his wife had both been wonderful Villagers and was for a time the chair of the Community Board. He was active in the West Village community and he was especially active in saving us from the Broome Street Expressway and also the fight against Westway, which took so much energy over there.

He was the person who could tell you the most about that [West Village Housing] and, again, delightful to talk to. He's not as spirited a talker as his wife, who is an artist.... She's a book designer and had a great success. She designed a famous book called *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* where the design was very much part of the message.... Get them on tape if you can. They have a daughter-in-law now who is into our field....

WEINER: I also wanted to talk to you a little about Westway and what your involvement in the struggle was.

SMALL: Not integral. Not enough to carry the ball. Supporter, sender of pennies, but not large sums. It was terribly important but it happened at such a time when I had heavy family responsibilities and I was not a leader in that at all.

WEINER: Just a supporter and a watcher?

SMALL: Supporter and watcher and an admirer and a believer. I truly believed, and that differed there from many people who were also preservationists....

WEINER: When did you get into the waterfront issue?

SMALL: Ahh. How did I get into the waterfront? Much as I loved—I think I loved water with space and I've always been part of this open stretch of river....and would do anything to live over there actually. I always regretted that we didn't live over there but my husband needed to be near the transportation depots.... I just loved it.

Now how did I get into? Oh! I was invited, I guess because I was the Landmarks chairman, to a party to draw together a new organization at the house of Bob Oliver, who was chairman of the [Bedford-Barrow-Commerce] Street Association. And we sat down and we talked and talked for a couple of Sunday afternoons, everybody who was working on any civic thing, about what should the new organization be to get the waterfront protected by landmark review.

And odd bethought me of this pamphlet, this pile of papers, and that the Council would do what we wanted quicker than to create a new organization which would only compete. We should draw together then...and that's how it started. It really came right out of this file folder in my lap right now. And Bob Oliver and the people who were there and Ben was there but was I don't remember having ever met him before.... We thought confederation, a council, would be great. Then we hemmed and hawed about a council. And then we decided that a federation would be even more permanent [inaudible].

Anyhow, it was created and in '86, I think was the year because the Board—then I began to get annual or semi-annual resolutions out of the Community Board saying we needed a designation and that started in '87.... And then they'd hemming and hawing about whether it should be a separate district or an extension of the Historic District. I don't care as long as it's a district [chuckles] and I don't care if there was a section number. If people would like to live in the Gansevoort district, that's fine with me, just please, Lord, have somebody help to keep the plastic signs and the aluminum storefronts out....

WEINER: I think we can kind of stop here....

[End of Interview]