

**Interviewee:** McGorty, Kevin  
**Interviewer:** Jackie Uhler  
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**Uhler:** Okay Mr. McGorty are you aware that the interview is being recorded and you're okay with that?

**McGorty:** Yes.

**Uhler:** If you could start out by stating your name and giving a little bit of background information about yourself.

**McGorty:** Okay. My name is Kevin McGorty, I am the director of the Tall Timbers Land Conservancy, I was the former director of the Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board, and in 1983 I returned to Florida to be the Senior Museum Curator for the Preservation Board under Director Nancy Dobson. Then in 1987 to 1994 I was the director of that state agency.

**Uhler:** How did you first become involved in historic preservation?

**McGorty:** Well my undergraduate degree is a B.A. in American History from Monmouth College and I have always had an affinity for history. But I didn't really want to teach and my wife and I lived in Tallahassee, she was pursuing a masters degree in library science. Florida State University was offering a masters program in historical administration and I was one of the early students of that. And then I returned to New Jersey to head up a county, Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission, a joint arts and heritage commission, government agency, for five years. And in 1983 there was a job opening back in Tallahassee with the Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board as curator for that board and I applied for it and returned to Tallahassee at that time.

**Uhler:** I know that the Historical Administration program, they have a limited training in historic preservation, did you have any additional training to help you with

**McGorty:** My training was in hard knock, really street training. Coming out of the program, it was, the program gave you a sampler if you will of archives training, historic preservation training, and museum training back then. It was the, the program was in its infancy. All of those interdiscipline I found to be very, very helpful because when I went back to New Jersey the first task that we had was to do a historic site survey of thirty-three municipalities including carousels on boardwalks, historic a cat boats, along with the architecture in these communities and we produced a four volume, New York City thick, telephone directory of the historic sites over some four to five thousand buildings were surveyed. So my masters program back at Florida State University, my project was documenting the historic buildings of Quincy, Florida and doing a national register nomination for it, and that training was very, very helpful when I took the position in New Jersey.

**Uhler:** When you first became involved in the Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board what was that like?

**McGorty:** Very interesting! It was under the leadership of Nancy Dobson who was just a tremendous community volunteer first who had worked very closely in establishing the Florida Heritage Foundation. Well, under the leadership of Nancy Dobson as I was saying, she was one of the key people associated with the Florida Heritage Foundation of local nonprofit historic preservation organization that really started raising concerns about the demolition of historic structures in the community, in the late '60s. And then Nancy, whose father was a very, very noted architect from Jacksonville, she became the first director of the Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board when the state decided to create these quasi government, quasi private, public-private partnership boards in St. Augustine, Pensacola, Key West, West Palm Beach and some other cities. One of the first projects of the Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board was the Brokaw-McDougall House and restoring that. But way beyond just restoring that particular building, Nancy was instrumental in Calhoun Street Historic District, the creation of that and the Park Avenue Historic District. Through her leadership she knew the Knott family very well, she knew Charlie Knott very well and because of that friendship and trust when the family decided that they were thinking about the idea of leaving the historic house to the state it was because really of Nancy's leadership that that became a museum.

**Uhler:** Interesting. Now when, do you know anything about the process of Charlie gifting the house to the state that you could talk about?

**McGorty:** Well I know a little bit about it, again I was, I was not directly involved. After Nancy Dobson's tenure with the board she moved on in a part time capacity to be with, working with the Supreme Court Historic Society, she became their director. Linda Ellsworth became the director of the Preservation Board after Nancy Dobson, Linda was from the Pensacola area and had worked for the Pensacola Preservation Board, very distinguished career, she had and very well thought of throughout the whole state system, preservation system and all. Nancy assisted Linda in the negotiations of the house to the state of Florida, so Nancy stayed right with the project, was really representing the family in those negotiations. By the time that the house was transferred, and I may be a little shaky on this, a little bit, Charlie had passed and his brother James Knott, Judge Jimmy Knott out of West Palm Beach really handled the final negotiations for the house. I knew Judge Knott much better than Charlie Knott and we worked with Judge Knott very closely in the restoration of the house and the furnishings of the house as well. Because the family, like Noah's Ark, they had two of everything in terms of antiques and an interesting side-light to the, to the restoration. Judge Knott always wanted to make the house something it never was and he had some compatriots in that effort. Mrs. Collins, Governor Leroy Collins' wife, a great lady, there had been a real strong tradition in Tallahassee of taking the native architecture and trying to gloss it up and make it something that historically wasn't there. So the Judge wanted to bring antiques up from Palm Beach that he had accumulated over the years, especially from the Breaker's Hotel and wanted us to get rid of the family pieces. And we, it was just very, very humorous how we had to always side step that issue with the Judge. And then Mrs. Collins, she didn't like the brick-a-brac and the wall paper in the foyer, in the entry hall. There was just really, there was some pressure there to gussy up, or pretty up, or make a

little bit of Williamsburg a little bit more colonial than the Victorian aspects of the house. Staff stayed true to the principles of historic preservation, we felt the unique story associated with the house was the furniture and its clear association with Luella Knott and the poems that she wrote for each piece. We raised considerable dollars for the restoration, the hand restoration of that wall paper. We really didn't accept pieces of furniture that were not part of the original house. It was a little bit of a diplomacy to work with, with Jimmy Knott to avoid that happening, he was a little frustrated with that. True to form, a number of the pieces, everything was inventoried, all of the antiques that the family owned were inventoried but the family, family members did get the right to take the first choice of antiques that were in the house. I think it would have been nice if we had a more evaluation, long term evaluation of those pieces but we also had a storage problem associated, cause it was wall to wall antiques of the house. And again Linda Ellsworth was heavily involved and worked closely with the family on not only the transfer of the building but also the contents of the building.

**Uhler:** Now you just mentioned that you had a lot of fund-raising to do this, what sort of fund-raising activities were going on?

**McGorty:** Well the primary fund-raising activities that were going on was grantsmanship through the state's special category grant. Larry Paarlberg became the curator for the Knott House and really did a brilliant job, most of the kudos besides Nancy Dobson, the two people that really I think were instrumental in getting the house donated to the state and more importantly, and then getting it into a museum quality were both Nancy Dobson and Larry Paarlberg. Larry worked for the division of Historical Resources as a site specialist, North Florida was his territory of working with communities to place their properties on the National Register of Historic Places. Larry came over from the bureau to work for me and it was his primary responsibility to get the Knott House restored, all of the items catalogued, get the interpretive exhibits going, so I just can't say enough in terms of his leadership. He has gone on to run Goodwood. It is a tremendous community asset. Both of those individuals, Nancy Dobson and Larry Paarlberg are the real stories behind the Knott House museum.

**Uhler:** Now you had said that Judge Knott had been a little bit weary of how the direction that it was going, he wanted another direction, was he happy with the end result?

**McGorty:** I think he was very happy with the end results, overall I think he was happy with the end result. We had a wonderful grand opening celebration, I think he was frustrated to be candid with you, I think he was very frustrated in terms of the state. The Judge was planning to leave a small endowment to help with the maintenance of the house and the upkeep of the house and we were trying to get the state to match that. To be quite honest with you at that time the state was, by the time the house opened the state was looking to centralize its historic preservation program, it really had through the sundown legislation it really had taken a position to allow the phasing out of these historic preservation boards and have just a centralized control of historic preservation from Tallahassee and that hurt our effort tremendously. The other thing is at that particular time historic preservation was moving away from saving the local mansion, the emphasis was on neighborhood conservation, preservation, rural landscape conservation and preservation and most importantly neighborhood, versus just saving landmark buildings. And so what we saw as the importance of the Knott House wasn't saving the Knott House in and of

itself, we had worked diligently to expand the whole Park Avenue Historic District. Only a small part of the Park Avenue Historic District was under protection of the Architectural Review Board and we, during my tenure tried to dramatically increase that historic district, its size and the oversight by the Architectural Review Board. As you are aware, downtown real estate property is always in flux and change, and to maintain two-story historic structures in a park setting in prime downtown real estate has been a real challenge. So we spent a three year effort creating and expanding the historic preservation ordinance and the overlay for the architectural review board. That was very, very controversial because a number of property owners did not want their buildings having to go through oversight of the Architectural Review Board or having a height control So we saw the Knott House as the state having a presence with a historic house and an investment by the taxpayers of the state in this critical downtown National Register historic district. So it went beyond just saving one particular building or telling the story of one particular family.

**Uhler:** Knowing what you just said, when you look at the Knott House specifically though, what do you feel the historical significance of that particular home is, why it's important that its open to the public now?

**McGorty:** Well I think it tells many, many different stories. Again I think its overarching story is set in its context of those seven linear parks and the remaining historic structures that surround that park system. Back in the '40s the city commission made an attempt to level all the trees in that two hundred foot area to make it one big parking lot for downtown shopping. Thank God that didn't happen because I think Tallahassee's character to a large degree is centered on not only historic buildings, but the setting of those buildings and its canopy roads, and live oaks, its Southern feel and Southern charm. So to have that, that Park Avenue Historic District still intact today and have a building open to the public that the public can enjoy, I think is central to the whole essence and signature of Tallahassee. Let me just elaborate on it, beyond that, however, I think there's wonderful stories associated, the stories of how Luella Knott and the house really reflects so much of her and the time period that she was collecting antiques, the time period of the Prohibition movement that she was associated with. I think about Mr. Knott and his run for the governorship as well, but to a large degree it's a woman's history and it, and its an untold story in Tallahassee. If you read the classic books on Tallahassee its very male dominated by these political figures, whether they had lineages to Napoleon or were the blue bloods from the Tidewater area. But to a large degree in the nineteenth century and the twentieth century, Tallahassee's character today is a direct result of the beautification efforts of women's clubs and to a large degree it was the women who stood up against the destruction of that character, both in historic preservation and the natural resources of that. I think that pays tribute, the building and that story pays tribute to that effort as well.

**Uhler:** I know that Charlie had originally, had some idea of maybe gifting the house to the state, because I think that his mother had wanted it to be a museum. I've heard some indication of that and I know that he primarily lived in the basement and covered up the upstairs furnishings with plastic and those sorts of things, do you think that helped the preservation process at all. His efforts to-

**McGorty:** Without a doubt the family has had a long tradition of being extremely civic

mindful. Their sense of history, whether it be Luella Knott's sense of history and that certainly was reflected in her children as well. Judge Knott was a noted local historian. He had been an author to many, many books in Palm Beach. He was Mr. Palm Beach history. I think that carried on very well, as people get older with these two, three story Victorian buildings it was very, and it was common in the nineteenth century as well as the family grew out of the building and the senior residents were still living in there, they isolated themselves to a downstairs area. Very, very common practice. In Charlie's basement, he maintained his quail, he had an affinity for these hunting plantations in northern Leon County. He was great friends with these northerners, he was a bon vivant at the parties. He escorted some of the prominent women to these parties and he was really a social person. James Knott had the same charisma in Palm Beach where he was a judge down there. But their sense of history, whether and you could see this in their writings, even in the family letters, the family has always had that sense of history and sense of place.

**Uhler:** When the restoration process began to take place at the Knott House, was it at that time that you were the president of the Historic

**McGorty:** Yes, I was the director of the Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board at the time that we initiated the actual restoration. We had secured, I think a little over 1.2 million dollars, I mentioned about the fund-raising. Our primary fund-raising was through two or three state grants, could of been as many as four state grants under the wonderful special category program we received two, about half a million dollar state grants and then some planning money and architectural planning money and stabilization money. Larry Paarlberg was the author of most of those grants and we were very, very grateful for the Historic Preservation Advisory Council's support which ranked the Knott House project as high on the list in order to secure that funding. We hired Ajax Construction Company as the general contractor. We actually had two architects, but Leslie Dival from Maitland, I believe, but Leslie became the principal architect and she did a masterful job because we had a lot of challenges associated with the house in terms of handicap accessibility and a real challenge with fire code, meeting the fire code with the property.

**Uhler:** What were some of the problems and how did you overcome them?

**McGorty:** Well I'm not sure that we overcame all of them to be honest with you, but we certainly wanted, this was a time of the ADA federal legislation on handicap accessibility which really required accessibility or program that people would not be denied to the multiple levels that you have in the building and the story that you're kind of conveying. We had problems in terms of the fire code on the back of the building, that was not historic fabric to the building. We decided to go to a 1940 footprint of the building, the building had metamorphosed many, many times since its beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. The family had put a ballroom on in the back, the kitchen was reoriented, the basement wasn't used fully, so we went back to a 1940s footprint, the state architects, and our board decided that would maximize the usage and that was the strongest, structurally that was the strongest part of the building. More later additions to the building were the weakest parts, as you got to more contemporary times those were the weak parts of the building so we did selective demolition, went back to a 1940s footprint of the building, recreated the kitchen area. It's a very tight building on a very small plot of land, and so the challenge was where are we going to have the public orientation, where does the public get a sense of how this building fits into the context of Tallahassee history. And so we decided to

convert a portion of the basement to utilize that, rather than build a new building, there was thoughts of actually building a new building behind it but we were not able to secure additional land to do that. So again, trying to fit a multi-component museum interpretation into a very tight building on a very tight lot was one of the key challenges.

**Uhler:** Have you been back to the museum since its opened?

**McGorty:** Yeah, yes I've been back a few times. My family has, I actually enjoy it now having stepped away from the hectic demands, because the Knott House project was one of many projects that the Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board was involved in. We were doing major surveys of the Frenchtown neighborhood, the Country Club Estates, Lafayette Park, we were doing National Register nominations, we were revising the historic preservation ordinance, we were heavily involved in a historic plantation survey of the remaining plantations both hunting and antebellum. So the Knott House was only one of a multitude of programs, but having that program under the leadership of Larry Paarlberg and he being able to focus all his energy and time to that project, enabled us to do our other work as well.

**Uhler:** Are you happy with how the museum is portraying the history of the family?

**McGorty:** I think they very much have stayed to the original intent, the spirit and the goals of the museum. We did a lot of museum planning, we didn't just start on the bricks and mortars, we had, we brought in top notch museum consultants in the country to help us shape a museum plan for, an interpretive plan, there were some very qualified graduate students and people associated with it that wrote the history and researched the history of the property and so a lot of planning went into it, it wasn't something that we secured the building and two years later we opened to the public. There was a long time period of planning associated with it, then fund-raising and then about five years in the actual restoration of the building, four or five years.

**Uhler:** How did you find community support during the restoration process?

**McGorty:** Mixed, because we were embroiled in this more controversial trying to expand the protection in the historic district so we were getting one columnist from the Democrat wrote the headline article was, "You are entering the twilight zone," because we were actually fighting some very prominent families, the Lewis family, Dennis Murphy, and some other people who lived in these historic buildings and really wanted to have maximum flexibility to either demolish those buildings and the Lewis family was actually looking to move their building to the FSU Law School and we convinced Sandy O'Alemberte that, that would be taking the heart out of, and the soul out of downtown if we loose this historic district, and we're very grateful that he saw the wisdom not to relocate the building. I'm not suggesting to put any black hats on anybody, these are private property owners but in the end I'm very grateful that the Lewis house wasn't moved, it was beautifully restored and is part and parcel, continues to be of the fabric of downtown. We got tremendous support again from the state in terms of financial support, but I think where we may have made a mistake, certainly in light in what Larry has done with Goodwood, Larry engaged the public right from the beginning to be part of the process of the restoration of Goodwood and its gardens. In many ways that's a better way to engage the community rather than work behind the scenes, closed door for five to seven years and then poof

you open in a grand celebration. You really build community support by engaging the public to come in, volunteer, help, and I think Goodwood has a tremendous core group of constituents that have helped because they've been involved with it from day one, we didn't do that with the Knott House Museum. We were so preoccupied with other things, and I think we lost, we could have built greater public support for it. The other challenge is, which I do like now, is that the building itself needs to be a showplace and it doesn't end on the front or the back porch and the actual front porch of the building is Lewis Park. So I like the idea to have concerts in the park, to have the swing band in the park is an extension from a programmatic standpoint of the Knott House museum, it needs to do more of those community outreach kind of programs. The program associated with Valentine's day, our program we were celebrating Red Barber at our grand opening, he had broadcast from NPR a weekly, and he would always start his broadcast, famous Yankee baseball announcer who lived in Tallahassee but he would do his broadcast live from Tallahassee and during the opening we had a special exhibit associated with him. He had a fabulous camellia garden in Tallahassee. Some more programs, more outreach programs I think are key in extending, getting people to return and come back and really feel that both the Park Avenue District and the Knott House is a very special place, that they want to come back and see and bring family members to see.

**Uhler:** I know on the phone when we spoke previously that you mentioned that you had met Charlie Knott once or twice, and you were more acquaintances rather than knowing him very well, but what were your first impressions of him, of his personality, if you remember anything of that sort?

**McGorty:** Well I met Charlie on more than one or two occasions, I had the privilege of talking with him at length, but I didn't work closely with him in terms of the planning of the transfer of the building. By the time I came onto the project, Charlie was in poor health but he had a keen intellect, he never lost that. Nor did Judge Knott in his later years at all, they reminded me very much of my father, my father had severe arthritis and very poor health, but the mind was always working. Charlie was a student of politics, that ran deep in the family and he was a student of social graces and the goings on socially. Subsequent, and Jimmy Knott in his books on growing up, the family growing up in Tallahassee - the family was very intellectual in their interest, varied interest in different things and all. So even though Charlie was in poor health you could sit and have a very thorough and interesting conversation with him about what life was like in Tallahassee in the twenties, and thirties, and forties and growing up. And fortunately Jimmy Knott put those tales and stories down to pen-

**Uhler:** In *Tales From Tallahassee*?

**McGorty:** In *Tales From Tallahassee*, and that is a legacy that is wonderful cause so many times similar to these oral histories you don't, public never from one generation to another so much is lost because of that.

**Uhler:** Did Charlie Knott ever, when you were talking to him, talk to you about his hunting experiences?

**McGorty:** Since coming here to Tall Timbers and doing further research on different

properties, I didn't have an opportunity to talk with him but I know through correspondence and the great work that both author Bill Rogers and Clifton Paisley, the stories of Charlie, he was very, very friendly with the Griscom family, the owners of Horseshoe Plantation. Mrs. Frances Griscom in particular was a great friend of his. Charlie actually had a specialized hunting wagon built for her and she introduced Charlie to these northern families and during the hunt season which was, ran from November through March Charlie was invited to all of the social parties and what not, and he was a very, very important link for these families in the relationships with the city and with people who had lived in the city.

**Uhler:** Now I know you work here at Tall Timbers now are you at all involved in any preservation in Tallahassee?

**McGorty:** We're heavily involved in historic preservation. We are a land trust, one of the components, Tall Timbers is a biological research station, was founded in 1958. In 1990 we created a land trust to try and to save this very distinct American landscape, there's about 300,000 acres of these plantations remaining from Thomasville to Tallahassee in a six county region. It is the largest concentration of hunting plantations in the country. It is not only the natural resources, the endangered species, and the beautiful lakes and the unique upland long leaf pine forests remaining, but each one of these properties has historical and cultural amenities. We have some great archeological sites on these properties, some actual mounds. Not reaching the size of Lake Jackson, but reflecting the heritage of Native Americans. We have slave ditches, and slave canals, but we have a wealth of above ground historic structures as well from main houses to tenant houses and we work very closely in doing a conservation easement which sets aside this land permanently that it will never be developed. The families continue to own it and they can sell it but they enter into a legal agreement that they can never develop, so we will not have Wal-Marts, or Killlearn Lakes subdivisions on these properties, they'll always remain in rural, their rural character. And we have provisions to protect the historical resources on the properties as well, we have facade casements to protect historic structures, we have archeological components of protection, so moving from an urban preservation program as I did in the late '80s and early '90s to a regional wide conservation effort, today some 110,000 acres of the 300,000 acres are conserved permanently, and we're working to get another 80,000, our goal is to get about 200,000 acres. So we are heavily involved in historic preservation on a regional basis.

**Uhler:** Then I guess I'm just curious for person, since I'm Historical Administration Public History, do you feel that program was helpful to you in getting to where you are today?

**McGorty:** I think the program was helpful, I was fortunate to have some fabulous instructors. Rod Little was one of the instructors, he was the State Historic Preservation Officer at that time so his knowledge, the actual reality of historic preservation had a great influence on me to enter into that field. Another great instructor was Barbara Fisher who helped get the Florida State Archives program up, she was a historian. So I was fortunate to have some great instructors and even though the program wasn't as disciplined as it needed to be, because it was giving you a sample of each of the disciplines, whereby the University of Virginia or other preservation schools really get you focused, I enjoyed it and it was a much more renaissance type of experience rather than a mini-focus just on the architectural aspects of historic

preservation.

**Uhler:** Do you have anything else before we end that you would like to mention about anything we've discussed today?

**McGorty:** Well again I think the, I think the family left the Knott House and made a major donation to the state of Florida with that building, especially a building in the context of the Park Avenue Historic District. The state as it goes through its different cycles of strong economic times and weak economic times needs to reflect that trust and that stewardship, the state has not always been a great partner of accepting properties and accepting the responsibility of upkeep of those properties and unfortunately historic preservation many, many times becomes part of the lowest priority and I think, I think government as a whole sometimes is looked upon by the public as not being trustworthy. I am very proud, I think it was a great transition to have that property be held by the state, I think overall the state has done a very, very good job with it and I would just hope it would maintain that sense of stewardship it now holds in that particular building.

**Uhler:** Great, I definitely agree. I'm just going to ask you that you were aware that we recorded this?

**McGorty:** Sure.

END