

# Charles Flynn

## *Wheeling Heritage*

Michael Nobel Kline: All right. Again.

Charles Flynn: My name is Charles Flynn.

MNK: One more time.

CF: My name is Charles Flynn.

MNK: And you're, you are the?

CF: I'm the executive director of the Wheeling National Heritage Area Corporation.

MNK: And what is that?

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CF: Well, the WNHAC, as we like to call it, was set up to try to carry out the plan for the heritage area, which includes a lot of infrastructure projects as well as a lot of conservation and interpretation projects.

MNK: Are listeners are going to need to--

CF: Yeah! Why don't we start over, why don't we start over on that.

MNK: What is the Wheeling Heritage Area Corporation?

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CF: The WNHAC is a, is the corporation that's set up to carry out the plan for the heritage area, which really is a development plan to renew downtown and really to bring it back to life. It includes a lot of bricks and mortar projects, such as the Artisan Center, the new garage and the riverfront development. And I can, I can talk at length about all the dollars being spent, but I think that what's important about those projects is they're a means to an end. And the end is, I think, to renew the center of the city. I mean what, what separates a city from suburbs and other areas is that it's a meeting place for all people, for all citizens. It is an area where whatever neighborhood you, you live in, whatever job you have, it's a common ground. And I think it's been neglected in recent years. And I think this effort is an effort to try to restore some green space to that area on the riverfront, to restore some excitement and some life. All you have to do is listen to some of your interviews of

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Wheeling in the '30s and '40s and you see the kind of public life that was in Wheeling. I think we're restoring that sense of life is extremely important to, to not only Wheeling's economy, but I think to the spirit of Wheeling.

MNK: Okay. Why would the heritage area be interested in supporting a series of radio programs addressing the issues of hate in American society?

CF: Well I think our, our--

MNK: Would you include the question in the answer?

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CF: Okay. The, the question of why the heritage area would be interested in working with this program that, that would speak against hate in America really has to do with our effort to bring all people, all Wheeling residents into this program. As I said, we can have brick and mortar programs, but those dollars will come and go and really all that will be left are brick and mortar. And the only way this program is going to work and really bring, bring life to Wheeling is if everyone's included. I mean you, you don't have a development program--A, a good example is in Detroit. You had the, the Renaissance Center in downtown Detroit, and it's just, it looks like it landed there from outer space. Meanwhile decline and decay goes on around it. And the reason is is because it was an elitist development that catered to one part of the population and really didn't include everybody. And I think the key in Wheeling is not only to have good economic development programs in place, but to have a waterfront development that will draw all elements of the population. But beyond, beyond

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just the bricks and mortar--Again, what I want to talk about is we wanted to help on this program because one of the things that you notice about Wheeling in the '20s, '30s and '40s is even though people had it tough economically, they had a sense of place and a sense of belonging, whether it was to their neighborhood, their church, their family. And that sense of belonging runs very deep through all the interviews that you folks have been doing. And that sense of belonging in America, I think, is being lost. And people, I think, turn in fear to create barriers because they don't have that sense of belonging. To create a greater understanding among people in Wheeling is not only good economic sense, it's, it's the right thing to do.

MNK: Okay. So that it's, it's not enough to have a, sort of a master architectural plan. When we're talking about area redevelopment, we're really talking about reshaping attitudes, do you think, or, or opening, opening doors?

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CF: Oh, I definitely think so. I--When I became executive director a year ago in 1994, I think people were skeptical generally. They were sort of cynical about all the different plans that Wheeling had had for the last thirty years to improve itself. And that's because they felt left out. A, a simple example perhaps, but I think a powerful one, was our decision on what to do with the outside of the Artisan Center. We had all these architectural experts saying to paint it this or paint it that. We ran a poll, a telephone poll in the newspaper. And we showed three different examples, and we said, what do you think. Eighty-five percent of the response, we had over a thousand respondents to the telephone poll, said leave it unpainted brick because that's what, that's what Wheeling is about. Wheeling is about Victorian architecture and quality, basic architecture, not something real fancy that really doesn't fit. And you don't know how many times I've had people come up to me in the street and

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basically feel ownership and say, "Hey, I wanted it brick too, and I see it's going to stay brick." And that

was sort of a first point where I think the mass of people felt involved in the project. And it's not really anyone's fault. There have been an extensive outreach effort for formal sort of planning meetings and so forth, but I think we've got to go beyond the conventional, sort of public meeting format. And certainly that telephone poll was one, and I think this program is another. That, that connecting with, so the average person in Wheeling, the common man, the, the person who's doing the work and getting the job done in Wheeling. I think if, if we develop a coalition among people to say this heritage effort makes sense. We're proud of our past. We're, we're proud of what we've done in this town. Obviously there are problems and we need to fix them, but what, what made Wheeling great was as an innovator, whether it was the Suspension Bridge or whether it was the beginning of labor unions or whatever it was, Wheeling was an innovator. And, and

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maybe with this program we can be an innovator for the country.

MNK: How can a city which has systematically excluded various segments of its population reverse that trend and begin to--How can it really make people feel included and accepted in the, in part of the larger picture?

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CF: Well, I'm, I'm one who thinks that, maybe having gone through the '60s and early '70s, I didn't, I never found that public apologies or breast beating or, or that sort of thing really ever made any, did any good. It might, it might make an individual feel better for having apologized for what has occurred, but that's not, you know, that doesn't seem to--Momentarily it makes a difference for an individual, but I think admitting those things and coming to grips with, with the problems that have occurred in the past, but not dwelling on them, saying, "Okay, this occurred. Now, what are we going to do about it? What are we going to, together, do to make a difference?" And I certainly think that the groups that have come together in response to, to the, the program that was unfortunately aired, you know, I think is an indication. I think there's been a very strong response and, and a pretty broad response in connection to it. So it's a start.

You know, there are, there are absolutely no

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easy answers. I mean we--The only easy answers you see are the ones that tend to come out of the extremes in our society. And, and God forbid, you see, you see what comes out of that in Oklahoma and so forth. You know, how, how to change the human heart? I don't know. It's--I guess part of it is just pure habit. I mean if you--If we change our habits, habits influence attitudes and attitudes influence beliefs. So all we can try to do now is, is change our habits. A good example, I think, is Wheeling's attitude about The Point Museum. I came in as an outsider a year ago and sort of as a tourist professional, looked at that place and said, "This is, this is a dynamite tourist venue." And yet I kept meeting questions of, well, "Who'd want to go up there" or--

MNK: Can you explain where 'up there' is?

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CF: Okay. It's on Vineyard Hill. It's by the public housing projects, atop Wheeling Hill, overlooking

downtown and the river. The Point Museum is really a beautiful overlook that, where you can tell all history of Wheeling and the geography and topography of the Ohio River. It's just an absolutely gorgeous spot. But I found sort of a, almost a wall of silence that no one was really saying, "Gee, we should develop that." And yet in the last year, Chip West, who's the owner of The Point, has been appointed to the Convention Visitor's Bureau executive board. We've developed a brochure that features not only various sites but including The Point. And I think it's--There's a--He's been featured in some radio programs on, on different stations around town. My point is that sometimes just an effort, an ongoing effort to, to--And, and it takes persistence. I mean there's--You say it once, that The Point is a great place, and people ignore you. And you got to say it twenty times and fifty

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times and a hundred times. And then it works its way through to a point where that tourist site is now an integral part of our economic development strategy. And it didn't just happen. I think that's a good example of how, just through persistence, things begin to change and attitudes begin to change. We want to start having not just tourists, but Wheeling people come to that site and, and see what's available. And that, that, you know, people think it's dangerous up there. Well, from what Chip West tells me, you know, it isn't. In fact, it's not only not dangerous, and he's had no incident at The Point, it's almost deserted. I mean there, the population in that, in that area is very low. I mean I think the occupancy is twenty or thirty percent. So--Plus there's a police precinct there. I mean there, there isn't a problem, but in the public's mind there is. And the only way you overcome that is you just keep speaking the truth as many times as you can, as often as you can, to as many people as you can. And

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I--Again, that's just one little item, but I think it's symbolic of maybe a turning that's occurring in people's attitudes.

MNK: Are there other lines or, or divisions in, in the city which, which need to be addressed or--

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CF: Well the, you know, I, I'm certainly aware of--I mean, you know, that racial problems occur throughout the United States. I think what, what strikes me in Wheeling is not so much those divisions, but the division that exists, and the wall is really Wheeling Hill, between the suburban areas and the downtown and South Wheeling and the Island. I went out to speak to kids at Wheeling Park High School and most of them had never been to the Centre Market or, let alone The Point, you know, or, or Wheeling Island. And so it's not so much racial as almost--It's, it's socioeconomic. And that's why I think, that's why I'm so strong on, on redeveloping the downtown. Because if we can bring the suburbanites, I'll call them, back into the downtown and feel comfortable that they're there and there can be a mingling of people, again, at that common meeting place, which, which is what downtown is all about. That's an easy way, and maybe not a dramatic way, but an easy way for people

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to start seeing that, gee, you know, these people aren't coming from the other side of the universe, you know. They, they pay the same taxes I do, and they, they eat at the same restaurants I do. And they, you

know, that there's some common meeting ground. And--

MNK: And parking meters cost them a quarter too.

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CF: Exactly! And I think that's what--I think those are the divisions that, that most trouble me. Because the suburban areas, really that's where a good deal of what I'll call the wealth of Wheeling needs to be-- Those folks have to say, "Hey, reinvesting in downtown and South Wheeling, Wheeling Island makes sense," for businesses, that it's good economic sense, it's the right thing for Wheeling. And that's what's got to start happening. And that, that Wheeling gets reconnected at that link right on the waterfront in downtown.

MNK: So there's a--It's a question of, of bringing new life or bringing Wheeling back to life. Do you, do you get the feeling it's kind of a, a sleeping--

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CF: Oh, the potential is, is tremendous. I guess this may sound sort of odd, but I really think when that parking garage went up in the '50s, that Wharf Parking Garage went up in the '50s, and the, the city was cut off from the river, it got cut off from its roots and got cut off from its life force, which was the river. And then people sort of moved away to enclaves or, or new places where they felt secure or safe or sure of what was happening. And I really think once we tear that Wharf Garage down and we open up the riverfront, people are going to want to come downtown not because they have to for their job or whatever, but because they want to. And that's what I find exciting. I mean that, that sense of, of sort of the, the bustling, sort of throbbing pulse of downtown. I mean that's what--When you go to a big city in downtown, that's what excites people. That's what, you know, gets people going. And yet if you don't have that, if you've been cut off from its source, what do you do. And I, I credit, you know--We talk about the heritage effort, but I credit a lot of

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people. Whether it's the mayor or Pat Cassidy and Ron Hubbs, a lot of people have been working a long time, five to ten years, on trying to get downtown rejuvenated. And we're now on the verge of being able to do it. I guess the, the key then is always to keep in our minds that while we do all these bricks and mortar projects, that now that, and we create a beautiful riverfront park, we've created the stage for change. That doesn't end it. It really begins it. And, you know, what I, what I find exciting is over the next--When the waterfront gets done, you know, you might have ten or twelve festivals on the riverfront over the spring and summer and fall. And whether it's the African-American Jubilee or the Italian-American Festival, that we, that we can feature and celebrate the diversity and people can see, maybe for the first time, what their neighbors have, are all about in sort of a fun, relaxed, not a, not a somber setting. Not, you know--Let's try to enjoy, you know, let's try to

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enjoy this change and, and this evolution instead of everyone gritting their teeth thinking that this is going to be a difficult task. Because sometimes when you celebrate it, it moves along a lot easier. So I, I think that that's, that's going to be a way to, to open up the community to itself, again, at that, at that junction

point, at that meeting place. Because it's, you know, it's--That riverfront area is where the National Road met the Ohio River, where the B & O Railroad came from Baltimore. I mean, in a lot of functional ways it was, it was the, the crossroads. And maybe this is, it can be a cultural crossroads too. That, that--

MNK: What--You were talking about the downtown as a common ground, is that what you want to explore?

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CF: Yes. One of the, one of the key elements that separates a downtown city, and I'll call it the heart of the downtown, is that it serves everyone. As opposed to neighborhoods that might be defined by economic or religious or ethnic boundaries, the downtown, by its very nature, is to serve all. And it is the meeting ground where, you know, king and pauper share the same street and, and the same park bench or the same view of the river. And I think that rebuilding that sense of common place may be the first, at least physical attempt to create a sense of common bond. Hopefully that that's, that's what the riverfront development is going to, going to make happen.

MNK: Especially if in the process people of all walks come to feel included.

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CF: Yes. That, that we have events and activities and commerce that appeals to all, all walks of life, and it brings them together.