

Carlton Abbott Interview Log

Location: His office in Williamsburg, Virginia

Date: 03/07/04

Interview by Philip E. Coyle

Log by Tonya Teague

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(002) Philip Coyle: My name is Philip Coyle, I'm called "Ted" Coyle, and it is March 7th, 2004. Sunday...check that...it's Sunday, that's for sure. And here I am with Carlton Abbott at his office. It's 402 Duke of Gloucester Street in Williamsburg, Virginia. Would you spell your name and tell me your date of birth?

Carlton Abbott: Carlton Abbott. C-A-R-L-T-O-N. Middle name is Sturges, S-T-U-R-G-E-S, Abbott, A-B-B-O-T-T. I was born on Thanksgiving Day, November 27th, 1939.

(010) PC: Well, the question I was just asking you, is how you got into landscape archi—obviously, your father is Stanley Abbott, the designer of the Parkway, and how did you get into landscape architecture?

CA: Well, actually, our firm is a firm here of...we have about twelve people. But we're architects and landscape architects, land planners, and exhibit designers. So we do a number of things, mostly related to the land. I got into this business after I graduated from architectural school in 1963 from the University of Virginia, and went to work in Washington for a few months, and came back to Williamsburg to set up a business to work with my father, and worked with him. We started a firm called Abbott Associates, and worked with him until his death on May 23rd, 1975. So almost ten years. And we practiced—we did a lot of state parks, we actually worked on Cape Hatteras National Seashore, the master plan for Appomattox Courthouse; those were National Park projects. And we did probably master plans for ten state parks, which were then going through the funding for the BOR—Bureau of Outdoor Recreation funding—which was big in the early '70's.

PC: The state of Virginia.

CA: State Commonwealth of Virginia, yes. And it's interesting that the last time I did see my father, he was going to a meeting at False Cape State Park, which is the land between Norfolk and the Virginia border on the Outer Banks. And basically, what he was doing was to talk them out of building a road. Here was a man who built a road earlier in his life called the Blue Ridge Parkway, and then the second part of the Colonial Parkway, and the last thing he was doing was trying to stop a road through this beautiful place. And it's important that he did that. They didn't build the road, because it would have wiped out one of the last natural preserves on the east coast.

(033) PC: So is there a philosophy that you try to continue in this firm today that goes back to your father's time?

CA: Well, I think my father always had a fairly broad perspective on preservation, and really of landforms and shapes. I mean, that's what the Blue Ridge Parkway became, an instrument for preservation of the landscape, and I think some of the things we work on today, with Colonial Williamsburg, or with Fort McHenry, or Jamestown, is that it's where you don't build that becomes significant, and, you know, I think our firm embraces a lot of those ideas that were originated by Stanley. Most of our clients today are institutions or non-profit organizations.

For example, I'm working for a place called Manoken. Manoken is on the northern neck of Virginia, and it was the home of Francis Lightfoot Lee, who signed the Declaration of Independence right under Thomas Jefferson. It's the only home of a signer of the Declaration of Independence in Virginia. See, Jefferson didn't have a home at that time, not yet, and Washington didn't sign the Declaration, so Francis Lightfoot Lee's home. So there's a private foundation who's bought this five hundred acres with this home site, so it's a typical kind of thing that we do.

We've worked on a lot of historic sites, and Fort McHenry recently, and the Baltimore Harbor, which is the site of the Star Spangled Banner, and one of the last engagements of the War of 1812, actually, engagements of 1814. So I would say that a lot of Stanley's concepts and ideas we enthusiastically work towards in different venues and different conditions with the projects that we do. We don't come up with...we don't do a lot of commercial development or stuff on the commercial strips. Most of the projects we work on are continuations in some form of work that Stanley and I did together, like James River Park. We basically preserved six miles of the old park right through the center of Richmond, you know? And the old Civil War sites there, and so...

PC: Here, I'm going to ask you...what were you pointing to? Go on.

(062) CA: There's a drawing on the wall there, and it's really the preservation of a historic battlefield site. Well, the building site right there was Old Green Church, was the church that Patrick Henry went to for eleven years and later would say, "I owe all my oratory skills to Samuel Davies," who was the minister then. Samuel Davies later went on to become the president of Princeton University. And that church was hit by a shell in the Battle of Cold Harbor in 1864 and burned to the ground. So, you know, it's very important to religious history in America, but also to the Civil War. I mean, that was a really interesting place, and that's outside of Richmond, and we've been working towards the preservation of that landscape.

(073) PC: Well, I'm going to ask you, maybe not ask you. I'm going to make a statement about something that I think is important, and then maybe I'll ask you about your background. But I'm struck by how these relate to U.S. History, all of this work, and your father's work, as well. And, so I guess I'm wondering about your philosophy of America.

CA: Well, I think that the broad experience that we have had and I have had, which sort of overlaps a lot of Stanley's life... For example, when he was superintendent of Colonial National Historical Park here, in 1957, I worked in the visitor's center of Jamestown. Well, gosh, fifty years later, I'm designing a new one. So I really derived a lot of the ideas of that, and my understanding of America and the philosophy of America, it's

always changing as it does for everyone. I mean, our history grows and moves on, and I've taken a real interest in trying to understand how America was made, you know. I look for the first roads that came off of Jamestown Island. I can take you out there in the woods and show you where the first ruts are that, you know, ultimately became the way west and really the beginning of the Oregon Trail, if you will. You know, I can take you out in Wyoming and take you and show you where those ruts are today, or Boise, Idaho, where I go and fish and work. I went on...I worked during those years in college, when my father was here, I worked in Yellowstone National Park and Grand Teton National Park. So, I've had a lot of experience in all the states, fished in most of them, you know? I've skied in a lot of them, and white-water rafted and canoed in a lot of them, too. So, understanding how America was shaped, and...I've been really fascinated with Lewis and Clark over the last fifteen or twenty years. I've bought every book about that movement, and even bought the reproduction 1803 Harper's Ferry 54 caliber musket to see whether Lewis really could shoot a rabbit two hundred yards like they've claimed. But, you know, I'm interested in all those aspects of it.

So many of the sites we work on are right on top of Civil War... You know, my father and I went out to—we were working on the master plan for Appomattox Courthouse. Well, wow...you know, I tracked down all the people that surrendered there, where they went, how they lived. George Armstrong Custer was there. So I later connected that to his battlefield site and where he died, and read all the books about him.

So, I think, going back to your earlier question about the philosophy of America, you know, I love what Harry Truman said. He said, "The only thing new in the world is the history you don't know." I think it's very, very important for Americans to understand how things became, and fitted together, and where people went from and came from. Like a lot of the people on the Blue Ridge Parkway were...if you go along that Parkway today, Scotch-Irish names. Well, I've been to Northern Ireland, and you can see there the same names. They can tell you in those museums where all those families went to. I said, "Well my family, the Abbott's, left there in 1836 to go to Newfoundland, where my grandfather was born. My grandfather came to Brooklyn, and then to Yonkers, where my Dad was born. But those people over there can tell you, like they told me from a computer printout, "Hey, there are two hundred Abbott's who left in 1836 from Ireland and Liverpool to come to America." See, we're the children.

And all those names...if you look at all the names up and down the Parkway, you know, the Scotch-Irish names, and they were poor people, because the earlier valley had been settled by the Germans, you know. And so, that's why you see in Staunton, Virginia, those are all the Ger—even the gunsmiths that came down from Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Deutsch, you know, Dutch, which meant German. They all came, all those gunsmiths that produced the Pennsylvania rifle, which really wasn't named until 1926, but, you know, that's the gun that's on the gun board that you see on the Parkway. Those guns shot those squirrel rifles and things to live. But all that work that's way down in the Shenandoah Valley, right down over the gap and into East Tennessee, down to Arkansas and Texas, you can see the trail of names. You know, John Coulter and Jim Bridger. Well, Jim Bridger National Forest is in Wyoming, you know, the Wind River Range. There are forts up there, that all...Kit Carson, all those fellows, many of them, were Scotch-Irish.

And they brought their music, and that's why the Blue Ridge Music Center's so important there, because the Blue Ridge Music Center is located in the five or six counties, Carroll County, Floyd County, Patrick County, where that music really originated, and that's where the fiddles that came from County Tyrone in Northern Ireland came down. Because they were lightweight, they brought them. And they bumped into the 1900 Sears Roebuck catalogue because they were bringing the guitar into the mountains, you know. The mandolin was already there, and then you had the banjo, the bonjo, which came up from, you know, it was an African instrument, gourd, originally.

So they weren't ignorant people. They were just poor, and they went up there and took their traditions. I was talking to a member of Parliament in Northern Ireland, and he said, "You know, every time Emmylou Harris sings, I can tell you the roots of that music comes right straight out of Ireland." So, I don't know.

So, I think the American philosophy, which is a wonderful freedom of things to, you know, the evolution of politics and business and for us to cross this country is really quite amazing.

(160) PC: At the same time, when you're designing, you have certain logistical problems that you need to deal with, the mass of people. And I'm struck by...you said you had a hand in the visitor's center over here at Colonial Williamsburg, and, as I'm thinking about that, I'm also thinking about the Blue Ridge Music Center, and just the way...how do you move people through these sites in a way that allows them to still experience the history in some way?

CA: Well, you know, it's really interesting that Colonial Williamsburg is different from the Blue Ridge Parkway. You know, most national parks are outdoor parks, and the National Park Service just recently is even, they've developed some models that actually determine how much square footage each facility should have based on the needs and visitation and a lot of different things. But really, it comes back to not just buildings. It's really, what's the story to be told? What do Americans need to know about this place to enrich their historical views of America and to understand their lives and what these different special places mean?

And in some cases, like the Blue Ridge Parkway, it's this beautiful ribbon in the sky that takes you to a place that's uninterrupted from stoplights, and from commercial things, and it really puts you on a plane with nature and with just this whole different view of the world and beauty. It's one of the only parks, you know, derived from the hand of man. You know, the way the road reveals the beauty to you.

Colonial Williamsburg, you know, there's a whole layering of history and how we came to that history in the Revolutionary War, how we came from Jamestown. You know, the first legislative assemblies that happened in 1619, and the first slaves, and the first, you know, so many of these things that we've built upon. If you go to the new visitor's center, we designed a bridge there, the pedestrian bridge. Did you go across there?

PC: Mmm-hmm.

CA: Did you see all the little plaques in the deck? You know, about how we became Americans. It's called "Becoming Americans." And to understand that, gosh, at the time of the revolution, your food came from nearby, and that you didn't know anything. It took two weeks to get information from New York City or more. You know, you just... you couldn't ride more than fifty miles to the day if you rode hard. You know, you didn't have information. And, so, it's really...I think Colonial Williamsburg's task requires more support systems and layering of information to help build the story of what it's all about. It's more complex. But...

(202) PC: I'm reminded of Olmstead. I've done a little reading about Olmstead, and one of the things that I'm interested about that he advocated is that, you know, there should be these pastoral views, you know, and open areas. But then, off of the main lawn, or whatever, if it's water, if it's a lake, there should be little coves or dells or something that allow people to discover a hidden little area. And I'm struck by how that could be incorporated into historical reconstructions and things.

CA: Well, I think he was really recognizing the way we react as human beings and as animals, you know? I mean, animals will sit back in a little alcove and sort of survey the broader scale of things. You can't get a cat, for example, to walk across an open lawn, or a snake either. You'll never see a snake out in the middle of the grass because the birds will hit them in the head. You know, but, outdoor spaces are really made up of the contrast, which we did on the Blue Ridge Parkway. I mean, they were very deliberate about taking you through a very strong compression where the trees came in close to the road and then where they opened up into these bigger vistas. And they very definitely didn't want you to see, you know, have the road entirely along the cliff. Like along the Great Escarpment, you know. They'd bring you away from it and bring you back to it. So there's renewed interest, sometimes in the dell, sometimes revealing the open landscape to you, or an open field, and then back into wood line. So it's variety. And the park planners would say that the variety is the spice of the Parkway.

PC: I was reading this book. It was actually a... This comes to a conversation that we had a long time ago now. You recommended that I talk to Lynn Miller.

CA: Did you?

PC: I did, yes.

CA: Yes...

(234) PC: And I talked to him, and he recommended a book called *Mountains Without Handrails*, which is an interesting book, and the argument of this book is that the National Park Service should challenge Americans, that it's not enough to just pander to the lowest common denominator of, you know, our instincts to be lazy, I think. But that the Park Service should encourage people to get out of their cars and to explore and that's going to be the highest aspect of themselves. Do you ever feel like you have to, how do I put it? You know, Americans can be somewhat lazy and complacent, and maybe all

people. Maybe it's not just Americans. But do you ever feel like you have to challenge people?

CA: Oh yes. We try to do that all the time. I mean, look at the bridge at Colonial Williamsburg. I mean, we want people to walk into the historic area, and there we brought the historic area closer to the visitor's center and tried to make the walk much more interesting and compelling. The Parkway was actually built in a time when automobiles were fresh on the landscape, and it was designed for automobiles. And in a way, it works very well for that. You know, today—and there won't be another Blue Ridge Parkway—I can remember my father looking out the windows in the studio in, maybe, 1973 or so. He looked out there, and he turned around to me, and he said, "You know," he says, "There'll never be another Blue Ridge Parkway." And I don't think he was saying, "There'll never be a Blue Ridge Parkway for me." I think he was saying, "There'll never be the conditions for another Blue Ridge Parkway to happen in America," you know? That time when the landscape was open and threatened by over harvesting, and they could go in and buy it fairly cheap, and it was a reclamation project, basically. But it's unique in the sense that there really isn't another kind of thing like it.

You know, there are other parks, and my father actually went out and helped in 1963 to lay out the boundaries for new lands for new landscaped special preservation called North Cascades National Park. So he was out there, you know. I've got pictures of him riding around on horses and the wilderness out there in Washington. So he really, even though he was here in his later years, after the celebration in 1957, he continued to do a lot of planning for the National Park Service. He was on loan briefly to the state of California to work on the Redwood Highway. After he left the Blue Ridge Parkway, he was designing a major road to go down the Mississippi River. They were going to build a big parkway along the Mississippi River called the Great River Road. Well, it got squelched, basically, because of the Korean War. Then he came here to work on this parkway, the Colonial Parkway, from Williamsburg to Jamestown. And, some of the things that he did, he was a chairman of the State Historic Landmarks Commission. When I was working on Fort McHenry with Hugh Duffy, who's a landscape architect from the Denver Service Center, he said, "I want to show you something." And he pulled up on his laptop some articles my father had written about historic preservation in 1934 in *Landscape Architecture* magazine. So he had these ideas.

One of the things that the Parkway did, you know, as one of the first preservation techniques, they said, "Well, we're not going to tear down these little cabins that are up here; we're going to save these things." And there was no other time. And that's why they're so precious in Cade's Cove today, for example. The very few of this sort of delicate little span of architecture, you know, from the 1830's to the 1920's, that survived. My father wrote a letter to, I guess, the head guy up there in Washington, and he said, "Listen, the real challenge here is to preserve these buildings before Sears Roebuck provides the tar paper and whitewash," you know, because as soon as they had paint. You know John Grisham's book, *The Painted House*? It was a best seller this last year. But anyway, when poor people had money, they painted their house. I mean, they finally got it, made it, they painted their house, and that's why, today, one of the big things of mountain people is to have a brick home. "Man, if I've got a brick home, I've made it," see? So...

(311) PC: Yeah, that was a question I wanted to ask you about, because I read somewhere, it was talking about how Stanley Abbott, your father, had sort of a bottom-up philosophy, that he was really interested in the common man and the common man's experience, and getting that preserved as much as some of the more prestigious historic sites.

CA: Well, yes. I mean, he was fascinated with the lower. That's why all the names of all the overlooks came from right what they were. He used to tell the stories about seeing these old mountain people, you know, that one story about going to... They were so worried that some Parkway construction was going to block this mountain man's view of some mountain, and they all worried and they all went up to talk to him about it, and they explained that he wouldn't be able to see this mountain anymore because of the way the Parkway was going to go through. You know what he said to them? He said, "That's all right, I've done seen it." So my dad used to tell all these stories about, you know, people and these old ladies up there that were a hundred years old, smoked pipes, and these... He was fascinated with the people who not only lived there, but the people he worked with. You know, they loved him. He was connected to it, personally connected to those folks. And I remember there's been a stream of people since his death to come by and see me or my family, or my mother, while she lived. But he was very simple in the way he lived. He didn't have a lot of physical things. You know, he didn't have boats and yachts, and he played a little golf later in life, but he basically had a very abstemious kind of life. But he loved to tell the stories and to hear the stories of his friends along the Parkway.

PC: But I guess it gets to the question of his...why... You know, because he went to Ivy League college, right? Cornell.

CA: Well, you know, he... Stanley Abbott's father grew up in Newfoundland, okay? And he migrated from St. John's, Newfoundland, down here and his father's father, that is, Stanley's grandfather, was a lighthouse keeper in Newfoundland. And they really had a hard life. And they lived on basically this rock, a big bald out in the middle of the...and you know, the lighthouse is gone today. That's one thing I want to do maybe this summer or next summer is go back up there. And guess what? There was a little...I did get the family history from—a lot of them are Canadians—about that place. And there was a Stanley Abbott who died in 1898 at the age of two. You know, and so twenty years later, in 1908, when my Dad was born, see, somebody gave him that name. So he was always associated with hardworking people.

My father's father was a carpenter and became a contractor, and a successful one. And my dad used to tell the story that in the Depression, the first thing his father did was he paid off all his people and almost went broke because he wanted to make sure that all his employees were taken care of.

I went, this last year, to see my dad's house up in Yonkers, and the school that he was... You know, it's sort of a rough area now, but at public school number thirteen, and I went and took a photograph of it, you know, and some guys came up and said, "You pervert, what are you doing, photographing the school for little kids or something, you

know?" I said, "No, this is where my father went to school. He used to walk up these hills and back." But he was an Eagle Scout. He worked hard.

He actually, he was captain of the rowing team at Cornell, and true, it was an Ivy League school, but he was always interested in writing and literature, and one of the things he did—and I think one of the reasons the Parkway was successful—is because he wrote a newsletter, which he had actually written a newsletter for the... His first job was actually, right after Cornell, was at the Fingerlakes Park Commission, which is the lakes up around Ithaca, New York. And so he'd write. He'd do a lot of writing.

And my mother's side of the family, which was a great influence on him too, my grandfather was the class of 1900 at Columbia University—he was an architect. And his uncle, who he worked for, my grandfather worked for, was J. Henry Hardinburg, who designed the Plaza Hotel and the Willard Hotel in Washington. And my grandfather, who was an artist, worked for J. Henry Hardinburg, and of course, he would come to live with us in Salem later. And he would do designs for signs and talk about this and that.

And so, it was a very sort of integrated little group, and so I can remember the evenings in Roanoke and Salem where we lived, and, you know, the discussion about art and architecture and design, and even though the family was connected to New York. My dad was the last person in Roanoke County to be drafted in World War II. He always thought it was because he was a Yankee, you know? He was... and my dad, who was, I think, thirty-three at the time, and he had three children. (433)

Side Two, Tape One

(B001) PC: This is the beginning of Side Two, Tape One of the interview with Carlton Abbott.

CA: You know, I think that one of the reasons my father was successful is because he was happy in his marriage, you know? The last words out of his mouth when he had a stroke, he told my mother, "I think I'm having a stroke. I love you." So, anyway, my mother... See, they grew up about two blocks from each other in Yonkers, New York, and they didn't date until after they both had gone to college. They both went to the same high school. My father was president of the senior class at Yonkers High School. Now, this was my mother's father.

PC: ...Schanck.

CA: Yeah...Schanck...yes.

PC: S-C-H-A-N-C-K.

CA: Yeah, and the Schanck house is in the Brooklyn Museum from 1640, so it's the old first families of New York City. And this man, that is, this is my grandfather. His father, whose name was Boise D. Schanck, owned a seat on the New York stock exchange. He died of a brain hemorrhage when he was twenty-nine. But this is the man that went to Columbia, see? And look at his drawings. You can see the sort of, these are things, he

became the artist, they're in the World Book Company. These are all from about 1900, but these were things that he did, see? Remember these old graphics?

PC: It's incredible.

CA: You know?

PC: I love this style of art, too. It's really lost. You know, one of my criticisms of art these days, is that it's become so, what do you say? It's just art for art's sake, and then it's been removed from daily life now, you know? A lot of these people were trying to make daily life more pleasing, and decoration wasn't a horrible word, you know? I mean, it was a good thing to decorate books and...

CA: Oh, I know.

PC: Now, if you call art decorative, that's the worst word you could say, you know?

CA: So, anyway, we have volumes of stuff that this man did, but that was all part of it, see? This man influenced my father a lot.

PC: Well, it sounds to me like your father was kind of marrying up, in a way, into a more prominent family.

CA: That's true, I think. But, you know, he always had a very respectful relationship with the guy on the Parkway who was repairing or painting fences, right up to the top guys. As a matter of fact, later in his life, when he was in Colonial, he used to write. He was the ghostwriter for George Hartzog. He was the director of the National Park Service. Hartzog would call up—I'd be working in the basement—call up, and it would be Director Hartzog and he'd talk to my dad about writing a speech for him. So he knew the King's English, and he was proud of it.

PC: Well, there's no doubt about that, because—

CA: Because he was—

PC: ...Well, because...I just have to make this statement, which is that, you know, if you listen to that interview, or you read the transcript, he's almost a speechmaker. He speaks in this flowery, metaphorical way that is absolutely fantastic for an author like Harley Jolly to, you know, use. *[laughs]*

CA: This is my father's Boy Scout handbook from 1921. Let me read a couple of these to you. And it shows you. It gives his little address on here, 22 Ridge Road in Yonkers, New York, see? And it gives you all these little things, you know, and he was what? Twenty-one, so he was born in 1908. He was what, thirteen? Yeah. "Stayed in bed. Had to rest my foot." That was on the twenty-third of July. "Went in for swimming." Some of these are great in here. Those aren't too super. But "...went to school...played

football...rode my wheels...went to Sunday School...played football, kicked the drop from the goal line...went to school, it rained...got sick, my temperature went up to a hundred and three..." That was a Saturday in November. "Studied, studied, went skating."

PC: One thing I think is interesting about your father is, reading some of this stuff, you get the feeling like he had almost no self-doubt at all. That he was just completely confident in himself. Do you think that's true?

CA: Well, I think he saw, you know, it was a clarity of vision about. He saw it in very simple terms, and then he pursued it, you know? His watercolors, I mean, he was a painter. He did portraits of all the family members. I ought to show you this portrait he did of me in pastels. And when he went to the Cascades, he did these wonderful watercolors of the mountains. So he was always designing or doing things. He always had an idea about people. He loved dinnertime—they had candlelight every night—and to talk to the family. You know, we all told stories, and people would come to be with us. I can remember even the Secretary of the Interior sitting down at our table. John Dos Possos came to our house. There were a lot of really interesting people, and he always loved the stories of these folks and told the stories, you know? But most of all, he was interested in people, I think. You know, his ability to design really was from a very clean understanding, particularly of roadways. The geometry of the road, he got it right off. And that was easy for him. Once he understood how it worked, in terms of the geometry of the road, then the rest of it was just revealing the landscape and the beauty of the place to it, you know? He knew that the geometry of the road had to be worked out so it didn't scar the landscape. So it would move through it, you know, and reveal the beauty to you. And that's what those guys were like. You know, he went back and hired a couple of his professors from Cornell.

(B082) PC: Yeah, talk about that, because that, to me, is interesting. Yeah, go on...

CA: Well, he wrote that the guy had been let go from Cornell. What was his name? You know, he was an architect, actually. He's the one who actually designed all the... Ed Abbuell. Yeah, Ed Abbuell actually had designed most of the turnouts, and he wasn't just an architect. He taught my father at Cornell. He lost his job, and see, the universities were laying people off, too, so he went back to Kansas. And so my dad wrote him that Spring after he got the job and said, "Ed, come on back and work with me," and he did. He stayed thirty-some years, you know, lived long after my dad did. And then there were other people that he hired. I can remember those people coming down into our basement where I had a little train set and working at night, you know, making little worm fences out of matchsticks, and talking about Parkway issues. They all had a great time. And one of the best friends was a fellow named Woodrow—Woody Woodrow—and he was with the Bureau of Public Roads, see, which today, is the Federal Highway Administration. But the Bureau of Public Roads, they were the engineers who actually would design the roads after the landscape architects sort of laid them out. They did the calculations and the geometry, and they were friends. One of the last conversations I had with my mother in 1990, about two weeks before she died, was about, she heard from Mrs. Woodrow.

And she was still living, and she was the wife of one of the engineers, you see, who'd worked on the Parkway, gosh, sixty years earlier.

So there was some real camaraderie that developed with all those people, and basically, they were left alone. You know, my dad went up once to see Tom Vent, who was the head landscape architect, and Tom Vent crossed his legs and put them up on the government desk, you know, and there was a big stack of federal papers over here, and he looked the other way, looked towards my dad away from the papers, and he'd pull out a couple of papers, he'd ball them up and throw them in the waste can, and he said, "Stan, it won't make any difference." You know, so Dad used to tell those kinds of stories. Tom was such a good friend that when my sister later went out to work in Grand Teton when she was at William and Mary College, my dad was afraid, didn't want her traveling alone, so Tom Vent met her in Denver and rode with her out there in the airplane to make sure she got to the Grand Tetons safely.

(B116) PC: What about the people that didn't like your father? Like...

CA: Developers, or...

PC: Go on... who...?

CA: Well, I mean, there were a lot of people up there who didn't like the federal government to start with and didn't like the federal government buying land. And really, what's interesting, a lot of the adversarial issues, even still today, are in those high plateau farm counties down near Meadows of Dan and that area in there, because basically, the Parkway went through agricultural land. Not so much in North Carolina, where it was high on the mountains and we weren't preempting, but it turned out that the farmers, you know, ended up using the roads because they were better than their old roads. Actually, the Parkway only had, generally, four to six percent grade, max, and so it was really a very general road as far as mountain roads go. So I think that, I don't think my dad had people who didn't like him for personal reasons. I mean, most of the speeches that I recall had to deal with, even when he became superintendent at Yorktown—I can remember he was trying to move a trailer park off of Surrender Field there at Yorktown, you know, the national battlefield site, and that was very contentious. But usually, it was about, "I can do what I want to do with my land," and, of course, the Park Service was trying preservation. They were really promoting the beauty of an area, you know, through zoning, and scenic easements, and things, which are very innovative on the Parkway. So, but I think Stanley got along very well with people. He had lots of friends. And when he died, we set up a scholarship at the University of Virginia; people still send money to it, you know, for landscape architects. There's a prize they give every year at UVA. So he died when he was sixty-seven years old, but he wasn't...

(B144) PC: Let me get back to his landscape architecture a little bit. And, you know, am I beating a dead horse trying to make a connection between Olmsted and Stanley Abbott?

CA: Well...

PC: Do you think that he consciously emulated Olmsted in any sense?

CA: Well, let me say this. You know, he went to Central Park, he knew all those bridges, and he and Ed Abbuell went down to Biltmore, which Olmsted did in the 1880's, you know, to look at the stone bridges on those carriage roads that Vanderbilt had built. They were very much aware of all these broad ideas, and they studied at Cornell. They studied all those ideas. You know, Italian gardens, Olmsted, those were all big names in the history of their profession, and it's interesting. It was a couple of years after my father passed away, and there was a Linear Parks Conference down in Boone, North Carolina, and Stuart Udall was there giving a talk, and my father had worked with him a lot, you know, during the Kennedy years because he was working on beautification work for Mrs. Lady Bird Johnson's, you know, when she was making all the "City Beautifuls" and things, you know? He even went to the White House and was in the Cabinet Room there with LBJ, and he told me he'd got there early for his Cabinet meeting and didn't want to be late for the President, needless to say. He said LBJ came a little early, and so did Olson, and Byrd, and he said he sat, just the three of them sat there and my father listened while these old guys traded historical quips back and forth, you know, because they had known each other for years in the Senate.

PC: Byrd is...

CA: Byrd.

PC: Founder of the Parkway, right?

CA: Yeah, that's right, Harry Byrd from Virginia. But later, went to this conference, and Stuart Udall gave these wonderful talks. I mean, he was really a remarkable guy. And then, after he talked, I went to introduce myself to him, and he said, "Walk tall. Your father is in the company of Frederick Law Olmsted." That's what he said.

(B176) PC: I always thought that the Blue Ridge Parkway should go right into the Biltmore. I mean...

CA: Well, they had ideas to do that.

PC: It would just, if you look at the design of the Parkway and you look at the roads that go up to Biltmore, I mean, they just look identical.

CA: Well, they were going to take it down to pick up the Natural Bridge, they were going to do it to West Virginia, and then, you know, Stuart Udall said, "Listen. Let me tell you a story." He said, "President Kennedy was so gratified by the fact that West Virginia was the primary that got him his nomination that after he was elected," he said, "President Kennedy sent me out to West Virginia, and said, 'Listen. I want to build you all a Blue Ridge Parkway.'" And the people in West Virginia said no, they just wanted interstates. But Kennedy and through Udall, you know, wanted to give something

beautiful to West Virginia, and. But my father, you know, you don't remember him, you know, and that was in the sixties, you see. Fifty-eight through sixty-three or sixty-six, sixty-three, so... And I think he stayed on with Johnson, didn't he? He must have.

PC: I think so.

CA: Yeah. Well, but I think there's a correlation, and I think the one thing Frederick Law Olmsted was, he was a very broad thinker. He wasn't just a detailed man. I mean, he was a detailed man, too, but it wasn't just about lining up a bunch of bushes. My father always used to rag. He said, "I'm more than just a plantsmith. And when I was a little boy going to schools in Salem, Virginia, I'd always used to tell my little friends and teachers that my father was an architect, because when they said, "What's your dad do?" and I said, "landscape architect," they had no idea. Even today, people don't get it, what that is. And, so, he was doing things that don't become, they become more beautiful with time, and maybe not for fifty years or more, but people recognize. My father, during his lifetime, was never recognized for the Blue Ridge Parkway. I mean, you know, it just wasn't a....He had a fit when they put those brown signs all over, because they had whole signs, you know, the old wooden carved signs. And so...

(B210) PC: Well, a couple of things that, see, that reminds me of Frank Lloyd Wright. Was your father aware of Frank Lloyd Wright's work or not?

CA: Oh, yeah. But he was...

PC: Because I look around in this state and I'm looking over here at your art and your design, and I see a strong element of Frank Lloyd Wright in that.

CA: Well, I think Stanley was always moving into the future, you know. I mean, I think that's what designers do. I mean, the world matured a lot, you know, from the time he went to school, all through the Bauhaus movement, through the Modernist movement, and into the house that we built together before he died. He looked in, turn off your tape a minute and I'll get you—

[tape paused]

(B223) PC: What I was just saying is that what reminded me of Frank Lloyd Wright was the idea that he designed his own furniture to go with his house, and then you were talking about the signs with the rifles on them, the muskets, were designed by your father to go with the Blue Ridge Parkway.

CA: Right. Well, we were interested in detail. I mean, a designer, and Stanley was a painter, you know? He did pastels, watercolor drawings. He was interested in all those aspects, and they were all put together into a total picture. He actually, I know, on several occasions, he built furniture for the outdoors and he was very interested in the total feel, the signage, the landscaping. You know, one of the things he did, he had major impacts on Virginia Tech; he did most of the campus, Roanoke College, VMI, Mary Baldwin College. He went to all those colleges on the weekends while he was here and he had a

side practice. You know, he worked on the governor's mansion. So a lot of the things that we did together in the ten years after he retired from the Park Service in 1966, you know, the free nature of, they're a couple. Let me just sort of review. We're looking at a book now that (*pauses*), see?

PC: We're looking at a book called **Abbott Associates** with sort of a retrospective of some of the work of this firm.

CA: About ten years. See, the trails along the James River Park, instrumental in helping the city of Richmond put its park together and build a trail system along, building bridges, visitor's centers...

(B249) PC: Just yesterday, we were in Richmond, and we went across to the, oh, there's the little island that used to be a confederate prison.

CA: Bell Island.

PC: Yeah, Bell Island.

CA: Well, guess who went to the city council to tell them to preserve it?

PC: Who?

CA: Stanley and I. You know, we got into a big...

PC: We were loving the little pedestrian bridge over that thing.

CA: Oh yeah. That was an idea that we put forth, underneath that, swung under the big lee bridge.

PC: It was really cool.

CA: See? Historical parks. We did a lot of work for Anheuser-Busch internal, these are little parks in Richmond. In Salem, Virginia, we went back and did city parks. We did a lot of planning for Kingsmill on the James near here, recreation centers, and there's a park here in Williamsburg called Waller Mill Park.

PC: Talk about Frank Lloyd Wright! Man, that looks like falling water right there.

CA: And we did, this is a house I did. This won the Test of Time award in Virginia. It's published in *House Beautiful*, six pages. This is Stanley's work, it's not in here, but I did all the design and the furniture here, and did the paintings and...

PC: I see here, it's like Bauhaus all I see what you were talking about.

(B268) CA: Yeah. This is the house that Stanley built, Stanley and I built, see? He bought a piece of land for fifty-five hundred acres, which was just a barrel pit, but it was perched right on this promontory, this area that looked out over this marsh. My dad used to say, "The good Lord mows the grass out here." And that's where I live today, this living room...

PC: Well, I'm just looking at it, and here's this house that Stanley Abbott built for himself, and so, I just imagine, well, this is sort of a window into his mind and it's not the mind that I would have imagined at all, because it's very blocky and square and it's very prominent to the landscape rather than fitting into the landscape.

CA: Well, you have to see it.

PC: Although here, and now there's a deck with trees actually growing right through the deck.

CA: That's right [*laughs softly*]

PC: And, so, there's the Blue Ridge Parkway coming through, I guess.

CA: That's right. Well, it fits to the land. If you saw the property, you'd understand. I mean, nobody wanted this property. And today, these were projects we did for, you know, brand new ceiling, and this is the office the way it used to look and...

(B288) PC: So here, you know, I look at this stuff and I see, well your office, I should say, is in a historic building in Williamsburg, and it's obvious that you're cramped for space and it would be quite easy for you to, I'm sure, go in to put this firm in a different building. But, obviously, you don't. Why not?

CA: Well, because this is the heart of this little town, and this building's owned by Colonial Williamsburg. But, you know, the bank's over there, the stores, the shops are here, this beautiful street in America, one of the most fantastic streets anywhere in America, and, you know, the energy this place has. And, you know, basically, over the last thirty years that I've been here, the Internet and communications have brought the world to us. And, so, it's a great address. And...

PC: They know you at the cheese shop. [*laughs*]

CA: Oh yeah, you know, it's a place for my employees. It's wonderful because they love it. Their friends come to see them. You know, they all walk down the street, they're connected to this place. See, over the years, we've done a lot of work for Colonial Williamsburg. We've done their visitor's centers, at Carter's Grove and the stables; we just finished the stables and the visitor's center. Here's more work that Stanley and I did.

(B308) PC: Do you think you had a big effect on him?

CA: I would say that yeah, I think I did. We used to have these horrendous arguments about modern versus traditional, you know, which, from these books, you can see the modern way I was going. That's what architecture was at that time, and, you know, here at Colonial Williamsburg, Colonial Williamsburg does not build phony colonial buildings. They build, when they did their visitor's center, it's contemporary, see, because they want the original to stand proudly and to be respected, and they've always done that. And people come up here looking for, they see our name outside and say, "Well, can you build us a colonial house?" Well, we do a lot of restorations of original houses, colonial houses, but not new phony colonial houses. And, you know, here, for example, York River State Park; here's one that Stanley and I did. He worked this three thousand or twenty-three hundred acres on the York River. So this whole park area was the Chippokes Plantation State Park, and Carter's Grove Plantation. We did the museum here for William and Mary College...

PC: When I think back to the Blue Ridge Music Center, it's kind of atypical to some of this stuff. This stuff is older, I know, so maybe that's just. But, I mean, you've got a modernist thing going on there at the Blue Ridge Music Center, but then clearly, it evokes a barn or...

CA: Well, sure. And that's what you do is you build things in their context. You respect the local influences, the materials, the shapes on that landscape, and particularly, for the Blue Ridge Parkway, that's very important. And look at Hemphill Headquarters now. That's eighteen thousand or nineteen thousand square feet. Wow. Well, there isn't a building that's more than a thousand square feet on the whole Parkway. Well, so how do you make it look small? How do you depreciate its volume and scale and get a whole, basically, a big office building on such a delicate landscape, see? So using all those shapes and forms, you know, and the details that bring you down to a real pedestrian scale, but it's clearly a modern building. It has to be, with the systems and everything.

So I would say we're doing the same thing with Fort McHenry, you know? A whole lot of those buildings were brick. You know, they had the big barracks there around the fort, that's typical shapes. And so the buildings we'll do there will have a modern, they're modern, but they pick up the language of the place.

You know, and so, Jefferson, as soon as he could, if he had plate-glass windows, he would have used them in Monticello, see? He was building metal roofs. He was doing storm doors. I mean, he was doing a lot of things that were innovative because he thought of that. The reason the windows are all the same size on Duke Gloucester Street is because they couldn't make them any bigger, and the biggest ones went to the church. See, all the brick is the same. Today, you can buy fifty, eighty, a hundred, or two hundred different kinds of brick if you want. And you see every one of those in the street, but the two hundred buildings are all different.

One of the reasons Colonial Williamsburg ties together so beautifully is because the materials are consistent. The roof shapes, the size of the windows, the paints even. And the Blue Ridge Parkway is the same, you know? Everything, the old chestnut turned gray when it weathered out, you know, dark. And so the materials brought it together and married it to the land. The one thing Frank Lloyd Wright did do is he was always shaping his buildings to the shape of the land. I mean, that's so important.

PC: That's that continuity between Olmsted and Abbott and Wright.

CA: Oh, sure. I mean, he always figured what the land was doing. It's the form determinant, you know? So much of architecture today is just this same box put in a different place on a... You can go, my wife and I were following the Lewis and Clark trail several years ago and we were in Fargo, North Dakota heading up to Fort Union. We went all over Fargo looking for a, you know, there must be a typical old Fargo diner or restaurant and we couldn't find one. We ended up eating in an Olive Garden, which is the same footprint as the one just outside of Williamsburg here, you know?

So, but for the Blue Ridge Parkway, the beauty is the industry now; the farming isn't. Most of the big farms are gone. They can't support a forty thousand dollar tractor, two hundred acres, which is the average size. So, times have changed. The big agribusiness in the west is, combines cost three hundred and fifty thousand dollars a piece, and there's thousands and thousands of acres. So...

PC: Well, I think this is going to run out here, so this is the end of Side Two, Tape One of the interview with Carlton Abbott on March 7th, Sunday, 2004. (B416)

End of Interview.