J: This is Jim Beauchesne with a few notes about the interview with Richard Howe that follows. I’m recording this after the interview. Um, there may be a little noise from traffic below his window, or from Mr. Howe changing positions in his chair. Also he will make reference to copies of newspaper articles that I showed him before the interview concerning the demolition of the row houses, particularly one article about the suit, which a Mr. Riley filed against the Redevelopment Authority and the City Council in an effort to get an injunction to stop the demolition. Mr. Howe knew very little about the Merrimack Mills, its closing and demolition. So the interview focuses on the row house matter.

R: A lot of these are repetitive. You’ve just got copies of the same thing.

J: Yeah. Well today is September 18, 1997. My name is Jim Beauchesne. I’m in the office of Richard Howe as part of the oral history project regarding the Merrimack Mills, and in particular the row houses. Good morning Mr. Howe!

R: Good morning. How are you?

J: I’m very good. Uh, if you would kindly re-introduce yourself for the tape.

R: I’m Richard P. Howe. I’m an attorney in Lowell, Massachusetts. I’m also a member of the Lowell City Council and have held the position of City Council since January of 1966.

J: Okay.
R: I’ve served four terms as Mayor.

J: Great. Now were you born in Lowell? (R: Yes) Okay. And educated locally?

R: Educated locally. I attended Providence College, and got a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Political Science. That was in 1955. And then I spent two years in the United States Army. And in 1958 I began attending Suffolk University Law School nights, and I taught school days in the Town of Billerica. And in 1961 I became a Naval Intelligence Agent. I graduated from Law School nights in ’62. And I think it was in 1964 I began teaching at Lowell High School, and opened up a part-time practice. (J: I see) And in 1965 I ran for the City Council.

J: Was that your first involvement in local politics?

R: Yes it was.

J: Okay. Um, what subject did you teach at the High School?

R: American History and Business Law.

J: Now during the years that you worked in Naval Intelligence, and something else, do you (--)?

R: A Special Agent, Naval Intelligence, yes.

J: Were you living in, or near Lowell?

R: At home. At home. I was assigned to the first naval district, which had its' headquarters in Boston. It was at the Fargo building on Summer Street.

J: Okay. Um, now we talked about the row houses a little bit before, and also about the Merrimack Mills. And I’m just wondering if you knew anyone personally that had worked at the Merrimack Mills. A relative, or (--)?

R: I don’t recall anybody having worked at the Merrimack Mills.

J: No. Okay. Um, so you were elected to the City Council, I’m sorry, in ’65?

R: ’65, November of ’65 I, I qualified, or won a seat on the City Council. And I was sworn in in January of 1966.

J: Um, now this was the era of the demolition of the row houses of the Merrimack Mills along Dutton Street, which I understand was part of a larger project involving the Northern Canal, what was Little Canada area?
R: Well if you look at, view City Hall, those um, properties, that village adjacent to City Hall up to maybe Cabot Street, that was the product of Urban Renewal. (J: Umhm) It was called “Little Canada”. And there were three and four decker buildings that cluttered that entire neighborhood. And uh, at that time, after the war, in order to stimulate the economy, the Federal Government created what they called “Urban Renewal Programs”. And that was the beginning of demolition and reconstruction. And um, so that was one of the first areas in the city that was addressed. The second was in the Hale/Howard street area of Lowell, which is not relevant to this particular conversation.

J: Right. So what do you know about the origin of the project? The Little Canada row house renewal. Do you know how that got started? Who was involved?

R: Well I’m not so sure I know anything much about the row houses of the, of the, of the uh, anymore that I know about the uh, the origin of the other mills. Um, Little Canada was a result of the Canadian Immigrants coming to our city. I think it was in the mid 19th Century. Um, and that is where they located. The Irish came in 1920, and they located in the so-called Acre. Then around the turn of the Century the Greeks came, and they located in the Acre. And the Irish kind of branched out into Belvidere and the Highlands, Pawtucket, and uh, Centralville. The French, when they located in Little Canada, they branched out into Pawtucketville and Centralville.

J: Now this Urban Renewal Project, do you know how that got started?

R: Well there had been renewal, I don’t know. There’s not a country in the world, at least you know, any civilized country that doesn’t take care of, financially doesn’t take care of its cities and its counties. And um, in our country our structure of government is such that uh, we really have what you call separate countries. Um, we’re called the Federal System of Government. That simply means the national government and the state separately. We’re in the same plain. Each individual state is a separate entity in and of itself. And of course you have the Federal Government there. And it wasn’t until the turn of the century as I recall, when the Feds finally decided to funnel funds to cities and to states in the form of constructing roads, and highways, and public buildings, etc.

So after World War II, in order to stimulate the economy, it’s my understanding and my recollection that there was certain social and um, I won’t say social programs, but there were programs relating to um, having cities and states return to their former condition, what it was like before the war. In order to do that they created programs that allowed Federal funds to filter down into cities and towns. They did that through what we called the Urban Renewal Program. And uh, the theory behind the Urban Renewal Program was to demolish dilapidated substandard buildings, and replace them with new, more efficient buildings. Um, and that’s what happened to the Northern Canal. That’s what happened to Little Canada. It was an area that had been, become dilapidated. It was substandard. So consequently it was demolished, and replaced with the, what we had once called the cement huts. Uh, today they have been not replaced, but they have been rehabbed. And it’s now a respectable neighborhood that closed to City Hall, or adjacent to it.
J: Cement huts?

R: Well we called it cement village. It was designed; I was on the council when we voted to go forward with that project. And at the eleventh hour somebody come in with a, with a plan that would replace the red brick idea with the cement structures that we had. And they would be various colors, and so forth. I vigorously opposed it and voted against it, but the majority prevailed. And what we had up there was a two-decade disaster. Maybe a three decade disaster. And uh, but it’s now been replaced, and upgraded it so that it’s at least decent and respectable.

J: Okay. Uh, who was the developer for the new structures, the new housing there?

R: The ones that recently, the rehabbed? (J: Umhm) Or the replacement?

J: The original replacement.

R: Well as I recall, I think that it was Adelard Roy from Sanvel Associates. They were a company up in Ayer. (J: Umhm) They were the suppliers of the concrete, um, that was used to uh, (--) They came in concrete sections that was used to construct these various buildings. And um, it was uh, it was un, not only unsuccessful, it was unacceptable because of the problems that we had in the, with the neighborhood. And of course, as you probably know, in some ways people make slums. [Chuckles] (J: Umhm) And um, that contributed to it too. Um, what’s happened, I think it must have been maybe ten years ago, eight years ago, when Jack Kemp was the Secretary of Housing, he came here one day. I was the Mayor, and we transferred ownership of that property from the Feds to the um, Coalition for Better Acre. So they obtained federal funds to rehab the buildings. And now they’re what they are today.

J: I see. Um, now what happened to the folks that were living in the area at the time?

R: Well I think they did not rehab the entire neighborhood on one slight. I mean they took each building at a time. So there was a building that was vacant. It was vacant because somebody had vacated the property, or was moved to another facility, another sight. It was, it was completed over a period of time.

J: Umhm. Now the plans had to be approved by the City Council?

R: Uh, the rehab plans, no. I don’t recall they come in before the Council. We encouraged the Feds to transfer the property to the Coalition for Better Acre, primarily because of the representations that the Coalition made as to what they were going to do with the properties.

J: Well I wasn’t actually asking about the recent transfer, but the renewal itself back in the 60’s when the uh, (--)
R: Oh, the recent period. Oh I’m sorry, yeah. Well the Feds take, the Feds purchased the properties. They, they fund the entire project. They fund the relocation cost. In other words, people who occupied the three and four story structures would be relocated to another part of the city. They would, they would obtain, they would receive relocation funds. That was part of that program. It was a very expensive program. And I might say it was not a very successful one either.

J: Um, not successful because what replaced it was um (--) 

R: Well I think what happened was, I mean you’ve got to understand what Lowell’s history was all about. I mean during the 19th Century, Lowell was a world famous textile center. Um, and that was true up until about 1927, when the mills finally left Lowell and either relocated in Saco, Maine, or down in the Carolinas. And um, I blame in part the politicians at that time, not being more conciliatory and more uh, aggressive in trying to salvage employment opportunities for citizens. Because what happened, when they left there was nothing left for people in this city. And as a result Lowell went into a terrible tailspin. Uh, when I came on the Council in 1965, 1966 Lowell had the highest unemployment rate in the nation. It had the highest tax rate in the state of Massachusetts. I recall one individual. He was a track runner. I forget was his name was, but he was quoted as saying, “Lowell was the dirtiest city he had ever, he had ever visited.” It was just a total disaster.

Lowell actually hit rock bottom. It’s probably equivalent to what Lawrence is like today. Um, and uh, that’s why I have great sympathy for the city of Lawrence. Not as much, not so much its people, but it’s the historical significance of that city. But uh, getting back to Lowell, I think that um, if you walked up Merrimack Street here in Lowell, most of the buildings were abandoned. Um, boarded up. If you went over to Shattuck and Market Street, where the Market Street Mills building is located, you could just stand there and look through the windows and see the open sky. I mean the place was an absolute disaster. So at that time um, there was very little if any concern about the historic significance of these buildings. What we had to do was to jump start the economy, and try to get the city moving again. I mean it was an economic and financial doormat in the state. Um, and I think if you take a look at the past quarter century, you will probably feel the same as I do, that we have succeeded in changing the image, the perception, the reputation of the community. I mean we’re not known today as a midsize, crime ridden, down trodden, oppressed community.

J: [Clears throat] Now um, let’s talk specifically (--) 

R: That goes into the row houses and so forth.

J: Just what I was getting to.

R: You know, I, I read where there was one individual, I won’t mention his name here, but he, he, I vividly recall that gentleman. I mean he was well meaning and, but uh, it was obvious that he was going nowhere, because he had no um, I won’t say credibility. I mean he, he, I mean the problems were so insurmountable in Lowell that uh, talking
about salvaging the row houses, I mean that was the last thing in the world that a great many people were concerned with. They were concerned with moving the city forward. And, and uh, preserving the row houses was not indicative of moving the city forward. It was simply sustaining what we had for the last thirty years, which was decay and um, and um, and neglect. And uh (--) 

J: You described for me before we were on tape what you thought of the row houses at the time. Could you repeat that? 

R: Well I, I was a, I was teaching at Lowell High School. And I remember having a conversation with an English teacher. A lady who was much older than I at the time. I thought she was much older, but she wasn’t that old based on my feelings today. [Laughs] But uh, her name was Anna Ryan. She was an English teacher. And I vividly recall having a conversation with her. And um, this was '64, because I quit teaching and I resigned in '65 when I was elected as a member of the Council. But she was very much concerned about the row houses. And I was a little taken back by the degree of their concern. She was really anguished. She was, she was um, she was really, she was upset that they were considering the demolition of those row houses. Um, and uh, so there were a number of citizens, elderly people I guess, that recognized and realized much more than I did the importance of those buildings. 

J: You described the condition that they were in at the time. 

R: It was a disaster. The conditions were such that they had been neglected for years. And that they were just a dumping ground for vagabonds. I mean garbage and they were in total disarray. People, who lived there as I recall, used to dump in the canal. And it used to infuriate me, because of, it was just another means of ignoring how bad Lowell was, and not doing something about trying to improve the image of the city. And that was one of the reasons why I ran for the council, is because I wanted to do something to, to, to uh, restore Lowell to what it once was. Though I never really appreciated what it once had been until I really got more deeply involved in it. 

J: Yeah. Now that makes me wonder. Uh, there were certain small group, you mentioned largely elderly, who were sort of, wanted to preserve the row houses. And presumably of course they were aware of the historical significance. But generally I take it that wasn’t the case. Most people didn’t have much awareness? 

R: No, I don’t think so. I think the elderly, because of they, they grew up with the row houses. I mean at one time they were beautiful facilities. I mean they were well maintained. The neighborhood was a neighborhood of beauty, peace and tranquility. Uh, the neighborhood became one of crime ridden, and dilapidated, and substandard. And with the idea of Urban Renewal coming in, it was the expedient way to resolve the problem. Tear them down as opposed to sustaining their existence. 

J: Now the uh, the preservation advocates suggested (--)
R: I guess they called it the Redevelopment Authority at that time.

J: I’m sorry?

R: They called it the Redevelopment Authority at that time. The Lowell (--) I think that’s what that article said about Mr. Riley was going to sue the Redevelopment Authority, and other members of the Council.

J: Um, yeah. He was seeking an Injunction to prevent the demolition.

R: See, the Redevelopment Authority was an independent entity separate and distinct from the city government. I mean the only authority the city had over the Redevelopment Authority was the uh, appointment by the Manager of one or two members to the Authority. But the city had no, the City Council had no veto power. I mean, they always have the power to speak out, but I mean they had no um, what you’d call um, statutory power.

J: So if the Redevelopment Authority had approved the plan, uh, for the demolition there was no, nothing the City Council could do to stop it?

R: I’m not so sure there was not, there was nothing that we (--) We obviously could speak out, take a position on it. I’m sure we could exert influence. [very loud screeching sound] That’s the greatest uh (--) If you look at the statute on them, it says it’s the power of the City Council. Their primary power is to speak out on issues. I mean they’re just one boat out of a number of boats. But um, um, and I spoke out vigorously on issues during that time. I felt that it was the advent of what we called Federal Programs, Federal money coming into the city that we were not aggressively consuming those funds. That we simply were passively sitting by and not jumpstarting the community, not making it a better place to live. [phone rings] So I mean the row houses really meant absolutely no importance to them, or very little at that time.

J: Um, the group of people that wanted to preserve the row houses had suggested something like putting a museum there, or the Lowell Historical Society headquarters there?

R: I don’t think they were taken too seriously at that time.

J: No.

R: I mean they were just people that came out, and spoke out, but it was (--) Again, the city was in such bad financial shape and condition and uh, something had to be done to change the move in the atmosphere in Lowell. And uh, one of the ways we did that was to take advantage of the Urban Renewal Funds.
J: Now I understand from some of the articles I read from the era, that there was already a plan afoot to expand the high school across the canal into the area that was the, was row houses.

R: Well there was. And there was talk about locating the high school in Alumni Field, which is some miles away from the downtown area. Um, but that was basically conversation. I mean I don’t think it ever became so [unclear] to the extent that we were actually ready, or we were about ready to develop a plan that was going to expand the high school. I mean I think with 1980 (--) Wait a minute. It was during Sullivan’s administration that we did invest some money into it. I forget, it wasn’t too much. Maybe in the hundreds of thousands, to renovate the existing structure. I thought it was 1980 when we built the new high school?

J: I don’t know.

R: I think that’s when it was, by the addition on to the existing high school. [Lots of noise] We just put forty million into the high school now. Addition of a number of new rooms, and upgrading the computer system and so forth.

J: Now when the row houses were actually demolished (--) 

R: The row houses were where the uh, where the new school is now.

J: Yeah, did you see it take place, the demolition?

R: Of the row houses?

J: Yeah.

R: Yeah. Yeah. It was no big deal at the time. I’m kind of sadden by the fact that they’re not there, but at that particular time you just got to understand what was going on in the City of Lowell. I mean if uh, let’s take a look at Lawrence today. Uh, if I was running that city, or if I was a politician in that city, I would do anything and everything I possibly could to turn the direction of that city around as to where it was going, because it’s sad. And I think it’s true with Lynn, New Bedford, Fall River, Brockton. Brockton is a basket case today. So the historic part of the environment was, was insignificant at that time. In fact, I think some people kind of [unclear] the idea of working, of uh, of uh, I won’t say restoring, but preserving the mills and anything relating to the mills. Because they were perceived as being sweathouses.

J: That reminded me of a quote in one of the articles in which uh, someone talked about it as history that was best forgotten.

R: Um. True. But I think if you take a look at the overall picture, and that’s what we’re talking about, from probably about 1830, or 1840, up until 1927, if you take a look at the
entire picture, they obviously have relevance and importance. And it’s unfortunate that we weren’t in a position to view the whole situation at that time.

J: Now it wasn’t many years later that uh, uh, movement to preserve and to use Lowell’s history to help revitalize it, um, it really took hold.

R: It did. I think that um, I guess you could say that’s one of the things we did in order to restore Lowell to its um, uh, at least to improve the image of the city. Uh, we took advantage of Lowell’s history. You have the Mogan Center over there. Patrick Mogan was in, was in the School Department for a number of years. He probably was one of the individuals who ignited the, the move to look back at our history, to take advantage of it. And I think that caught on primarily because it was a way to give the community, or the city more status. We started to feel good about ourselves, because I don’t think we could have been any worse off, I think. So when we started talking about the 19th Century, and uh, and uh, that part of the 19th Century that involved the Civil War, and why the Ladd and Whitney monument is up there across from City Hall, and the importance of that monument, and what part if played in the Civil War, and what part Lowell played in the Civil War. And I think when we started getting into that, people began to take a second look at what Lowell had been like. And so we then started to pay greater attention to um, what our resources were, and what we had available. Uh, the Mass Mills was an important part of the restoration. I mean we did four hundred and fifty units of housing in the Mass Mills. I mean, you take a look at that place, it's a beautiful facility. It’s just as nice now as it was a hundred years ago. It’s well kept. It’s well maintained. And there is an awful lot of Lowellians enjoying the [unclear] of that facility. What we’re trying to do now is to do the same thing with the Boott Mills, the Lawrence Manufacturing site, and the other buildings. We’re trying to restore them.

J: So the movement to, to reemphasize the history was not only to improve the image of the city to outsiders, but also internally to improve people’s own (--)  

R: I think it was more to improve our own inner thoughts, and our own inner perception. I remember I gave a speech at the Lowell High School graduating class in 1970. And I think the thing that was most, the greatest impression that was left with me was the number of youngsters that wanted to leave the city. They wanted to go anyplace but stay in Lowell. And um, and I was truly saddened by that, because uh, it was kind of an embarrassment. It was my heritage, my roots, and I was in a position maybe I could do something about it, and we weren’t doing enough. But I think if you go down through the years, you’ll find that each decade we did something more to get Lowell back where it is today. I mean we had our valleys, but you know, Wang went under and we had a recession in the early 90’s, but we recovered. But hey, a lot has to do with the historic aspect of the (--) And I think when Lowell became (--) 

SIDE I ENDS,
SIDE II BEGINS
J: As the first half of the tape ran out you were talking about the National Park, and how that helps turn things around.

R: Okay. Yeah. Hm, that elevated the image of the city. Yeah.

J: Um, well if we can go back to the row house issue, the demolition, I’m just wondering if there are any particular individuals, or incidents that stand out in your memory?

R: The row houses really were not, they were not the number one issue in this city. It would be today, but in those days it was, it was something that was positive, because you were getting rid of a dilapidated, decayed neighborhood. And uh, you know, the philosophy, and the national level was to tear down and rebuild. And uh, unfortunately that philosophy didn’t work, because they soon abandoned it. I mean you don’t have, you know, Urban Renewal was, has been modified. In fact I don’t even think that there is no such things as Urban Renewal today. But uh, that’s what happened.

J: Um, in the uh, in the movement to emphasize Lowell’s history, um, you mentioned Dr. Mogan. Um, and how that was getting started. Did that um, make an impact on you? I mean did you see that as uh, viable quickly, or did you take awhile to come around?

R: Well as I indicated, I taught American History at Lowell High School, so I appreciated the importance of History um, in our societies. In inner society I felt that you know, the one thing we learn from history is that we don’t learn. And uh, I felt that um, what, what we ought to do is to, is to take advantage of the history. And uh, it, as we became more aware of how the City of Lowell fit in to the overall scheme of the 18th Century history, then I think we truly starting paying, at least I did, started to pay attention to it and uh, and become more involved with it. Um, if you look at the American History books, you know, as I recall, you’ve got Colonial History from you know, when Miles Standish and that gang came over in 1608, up until the uh, you know, 1776 when the Revolutionary War was fought. And uh, then you have the history of America starting at that time. And um, so that’s what you concentrate on is Colonial history and American history. You don’t concentrate on any individual city’s history. I think in this particular case where the city was so down and out, then we had to do something. And one thing we did was to look at our history and take advantage of it.

J: I’m actually wondering, when you were teaching, was Lowell history taught in school?

R: Never mentioned. (J: Never mentioned) Never mentioned. No. Lowell’s history was a negative. And again it goes back to perception of the city at that time. I can’t stress enough the fact that uh, we uh, we were in a bad tailspin. Um, that’s why I feel, I feel satisfied with, with uh, with my contribution and what has happened in the past quarter century, because uh (--). And the way that I, you know, the means that I use in doing that is to take a look at other cities. Lawrence in the 60’s was not a bad city. Lynn
in the 60’s was quite nice. Brockton in the 60’s was the leading city. Shoe city and so forth. New Bedford and Fall River. Today, Lowell is in much better financial and economic, and uh, quality of life condition than those cities are. And it’s, it’s due in part to people in government taking advantage of what Lowell’s history was and capitalizing on it.

J: Well I think that might be a good note on which to end, unless there’s anything you care to add?

R: You’re the navigator here. So.

J: All right. Well I think we’re safely assured.

R: I think the one thing that you’ve got to understand is that uh, you got to put yourself in the period of the sixties. [Unclear] you know, what twenty years after the end of WW II, and during WW II Lowell had a number of uh, the mills were used to produce war materials, you know, clothing and so forth. So everybody was, was doing quite (--) You know, I mean they working anyway, but uh, after the, at the end of WW II I mean, and into the fifties, Lowell went into a terrible tailspin. And I think the real sad part was that people in government were befuddled and consequently they looked, the deal making approach as opposed to doing what was best to the city. And uh, instead of conciliating, they, it was a confrontational attitude that prevailed over that two decade period. And one of the reasons I was elected is because of the fact that politics had deteriorated to the point where it was uh, it was a nonentity as far as improving the quality of life was concerned. It was improving one’s individual status as opposed to quality of life.

J: When you say confrontation, you’re talking between (--) 

R: Well confrontational between politicians, between politicians, between government and the private sector. Uh, I think that’s one of the reasons why the mills left. They had a better deal down south. They had a better deal up in Maine. I mean I don’t think anybody in government had, I don’t think government had the vision and the wisdom to realize what their ramifications would be if everybody that had any control over employment opportunities were to pack their bags and leave. It was just one of those things that uh, “well, you want to take off, get the hell out of here,” as opposed to saying, “well look, let’s take a second look at this.” Reminds me, I heard Finneran on the TV, I read about him this morning on the globe. He’s the Speaker of the House. And the confrontational attitude that he has with the Patriots. And it’s, (--) I’m no great fan of the Patriots, or the Red Sox, or everything else, but I do feel they’re a means to an end. A means to the end is to attract business industry and quality of life to a city. And um, you know, I listened to him talking about, well we’re not going to do anything for them, or do (--) You know, I say, “gee, that sound like what happened in the mid 20’s in Lowell. But I don’t know, I think um, I think what you’ve got to remember, in those, during that period of time when they tore the row houses down, they were, the general perception out there was that they were totally insignificant. In fact, they were a drain on the community. They were uh, they were shabby to shovel, they were abandoned dumping
grounds for vagabonds. I mean uh, people never took a step back and said, “hey, what do we got here compared to what other, the rest of the city is like?” So.

J: And uh, even if there was interest on the part of a few people in preserving them, there was no money for that I take it.

R: No there wasn’t. The money was for Urban Renewal, for demolition.

J: Right.

R: I think if the row houses survived for another decade, they’d be there today. Because I think by the 1976, the decade of the 70’s I think things kind of changed in Lowell. Uh, I remember in ’67, I think that we had an Industrial Development Director, and he made an announcement that Roach Barrel Company was coming to Pheonix Avenue and they were going to employ seven people. And I think we, that became a headline story in the paper. We finally got somebody that even wanted to locate in this city. I mean that’s how bad things were. So you’re sitting here saying, “well why didn’t you do something about the row houses?” Who the devil cared about the row houses? We were caring about surviving, or coming up with some type of a strategy that would improve, that would give people an opportunity to become employed. Okay?

J: Okay. Well thank you very much!

R: Uh, sorry I couldn’t be more helpful.

J: Very helpful.

R: Yeah.

End of interview.