

GERALDINE AND RICHARD JOHNSON ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT

Interviewees: Geraldine Kiernan and Richard Johnson

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ABSTRACT

Biography

Geraldine Kiernan Johnson (b. 1925) was born in Norfolk, Virginia, but her family moved soon after to the Washington, D.C. area. Her father, James Eugene Kiernan, was a member of Governor General Frank Murphy's staff and they lived in the Philippines from 1933 to 1936. Kiernan was transferred to the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 1940, after spending a few years at the Camden Navy Yard. In 1941, the family moved to join Kiernan in Navy Yard housing on Flushing Avenue. Geraldine Johnson worked at the bank on the Yard where the workers picked up their paychecks and attended the Packer Collegiate Institute.

Richard Johnson (b. 1919) grew up in Leominster, Massachusetts and Newark, New Jersey. He graduated from the Newark College of Engineering in 1941 and signed up to be an engineer for the Navy. After college, Johnson went to the Navy Post-Graduate School in Annapolis, Maryland, and then began working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard as a naval engineer and assistant hull superintendent. Geraldine and Richard Johnson were married in 1944 at the Officer's Club at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, after which they spent a few years in San Diego. At the time of this interview, the Johnsons were living in Connecticut.

Summary

This oral history focuses on Richard's work with the U.S. Navy and the Brooklyn Navy Yard, as well as Geraldine's father's work as a naval officer and a supervisor at the Yard. The Johnsons speak about their family history and lives before they moved to Brooklyn. Geraldine describes her life growing up and working at the Yard. Richard discusses wartime topics, such as the layout and organization of the shipyard, his day-to-day activities, promotions within the Navy, and the launch of the U.S.S. Missouri. He also describes the books and other materials he has collected about the history of the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Keywords

Brooklyn Navy Yard, superintendent, hull, marriage, assembly, dry dock, social life, U.S.S. Missouri, repair, race, Navy

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STORIES TRANSCRIPTS

Story 1: Long Hours at the Brooklyn Navy Yard
[1:00:45 – 1:02:05]

RJ: I would stay there long hours. Basically, the job was, “Here’s the job, get it done. We dare you to do it in eight hours—don’t figure on that.” I tried one night sleeping aboard the ship. They gave me a bunk where the doctor had been. And there had been so much work done on the woodwork that all the bugs come out of the woodwork. And I got up and shook myself at night, and these bugs fall all over me. And I went over to [Building] 292—they had a shower—and I took a shower and stayed there.

SS: *What kind of bugs were they?*

RJ: I don’t know. Well, I didn’t count them.

GJ: Possibly could have been bed bugs. Could have been; don’t know.

RJ: But they were all over. I could feel the itchiness all over me, and I had welts. I checked the OD, and then going off the deck I said, “Have I got something wrong?” He said, “Yeah, you’re all pockmarked.”

Story 2: Getting Meals in Brooklyn

[1:07:20 – 1:08:53]

RJ: I had breakfast at the Officer’s Club usually, and at lunch one of the handymen there would see me and say, “You want the usual?” And it would be, I don’t know, a lettuce-tomato sandwich or something like that. And he’d go over on Sands Street and come back with a whole pot full of those things.

And then for dinner, I tried a lot of places. I tried different places. One—you know where the Columbus [*phonetic*] building is there at the Grand Army Plaza? And Flatbush Avenue comes up, and if you go—if I come down from along Prospect Park West, I guess is the road there, and turn left and go by the Columbus Building, there was one restaurant right there. It was quite nice. I ate there once in a while. Somewhere over near town hall, city hall—it had a name. It was almost like you were going into a restaurant that’s furnished like it had been 1880s or something like that, tile floor and simple chairs that rattle when you pull the things across. It was good food.

Story 3: Geraldine’s Father: The Yard Superintendent

[1:49:35 – 1:50:16]

GJ: [My father] used to go around to the little different workstations in the yard at night before he’d come home and go to bed. And we had a dog, a cocker spaniel named Flapper, and Flapper knew the routine. And when the workmen would see the dog come, they’d have the coffee all ready for my dad when he showed up. And he would always check in with them and see how

things were going and any problems that might show up, so he was prepared for the next day. And that's why he could sit at his desk and wait for the troubles to come to him, because he knew they were coming.

Story 4: Launching Ships

[2:04:00 – 2:05:02]

RJ: Oh, another thing about launching—I'm not sure that they have it. There's a problem in launching ships that they were always concerned about, and that is that the current is quite severe. The tide comes in from Long Island and down, and the tide comes in from the bay and Long [Island], and that's where Hell Gate Bridge is located, I guess. I assume that's why they call it Hell Gate—I don't know.

But in any case, a severe current can pull, haul a ship and take it on its way. I know when I was being briefed before we went for the launching on the *Missouri*, whoever was giving it said it did happen—although I don't know I had ever heard of it before—that one of the ships being launched just got picked away and beached itself over in Manhattan.

Story 5: Women on the Yard

[3:10:24 – 3:10:51]

SS: *Was it a big deal when women starting welding in the yard?*

GJ: No, really they just were accepted. They were welcomed, because there was so much to do and they needed so many people to do it. And they were qualified. I know they were trained as welders, and they climbed all over everything and everywhere to do their job. And they were very well appreciated.

PHOTO CAPTIONS

Current 1

Richard and Geraldine Johnson at their home in Brooklyn (Courtesy of Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives)