



JOHN JOSEPH
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John Joseph Moakley Oral History Project

Oral History Interview with

Sean Hennessey

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Interview Summary

In this interview, Sean Hennessey, public affairs officer for the National Park Service in Boston, reflects on historic preservation efforts in the city. He discusses the establishment of the Boston National Historical Park; the sites that are part of the park; the efforts of Congressman Joe Moakley to acquire funding for these sites; Moakley's relationship with John Burchill, the late superintendent of the Boston National Historical Park; and how historic preservation has progressed and regressed during recent decades.

Subject Headings

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Interview transcript

LAURA MULLER: Today is September 27, 2005, and we are here at the Moakley Archives at Suffolk University. I am Laura Muller and I am here with Sean Hennessey.

Can you just tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do at the National Park Service?

SEAN HENNESSEY: Sure, my name is Sean Hennessey. I'm the public affairs officer for the National Park Service in Boston. Massachusetts has a great number of national park units including Boston National Historical Park, Boston African American National Historic Site, Adams National Historical Park, Minuteman, Salem, Cape Cod National Seashore. There's a great number of national park units here. As public affairs officer, I am responsible for government affairs, community relations, community affairs, public relations, and report directly to the superintendent at Boston National Historical Park. I've been with the park service in this position for ten years. I'm a lifelong Boston resident, and I enjoy my work very much.

MULLER: What do you know about the history of the Boston National Historic Park? How long has it been around for?

HENNESSEY: Boston National Historical Park was established in 1974. A couple of years before the American bicentennial celebrations were being held, the same time that Faneuil Hall Market Place, Quincy Market was being developed, there was a lot of attention on American history. And Congress established the Boston National Historical Park in 1974; President Gerald Ford signed the legislation. The national park is comprised of eight historic sites in Boston located primarily on the Freedom Trail,¹ and those eight sites are the Old State House, the Old South Meeting House, Faneuil Hall, Paul Revere House, Old North Church, Charlestown Navy Yard, Bunker Hill Monument, and one of the sites that was nearest and dearest to the heart of Congressman Moakley because it was in his hometown of South Boston, Dorchester Heights National Historic Site.

¹ Incorporated in 1958, the Freedom Trail is a two-and-a-half-mile path, marked by a painted red line, that connects sixteen of Boston's most significant historic sites.

MULLER: Have you been more involved with some sites than others or is there one that you specifically focus on or is it just general?

HENNESSEY: I'm more involved with Boston National Historical Park and Boston African American National Historic Site, which was established in 1980 on the north slope of Beacon Hill. And that site interprets the African American community that resided on the north slope of the hill in the mid-nineteenth century, and that story is associated with the abolitionist movement. So it's primarily Boston National Historical Park, Boston African American National Historic Site, somewhat a little bit with the Boston Harbor Islands National Park, and then of course there's a lot of crossover with Adams and Minuteman because they have Revolutionary War themes as well.

But we've tried over the last several years to present all the park units in Massachusetts in a collective and cohesive way because we do have a lot of real estate in the commonwealth and we do interpret a great number of different stories relevant to American history and the birth of the nation, the birth of the navy, maritime history, and that kind of thing.

MULLER: Were you acquainted with Congressman Moakley?

HENNESSEY: Yes. I've lived in the Ninth Congressional District all my life, I was a constituent of his and I was an admirer of his, and I had the occasion to meet him several times and work closely with his staff.

MULLER: How was he involved with the National Park Service and the Boston National Historical Park?

HENNESSEY: His involvement predates my tenure at Boston National Historical Park. I arrived in the mid-nineties, around 1995. He had a very good relationship with the superintendent of Boston national historical park, who unfortunately is deceased. His name is John Burchill, and John Burchill was a good friend of mine actually; he's the one who hired me into the National Park Service. But John approached Congressman Moakley around 1980 and what John was concerned about was the fact that a great number of our historic cultural icons were slowly deteriorating

through deferred maintenance. Some of those icons, of course, would be Faneuil Hall, Old South Meeting House, Old State House. And John Burchill approached Joe Moakley and said—let the congressman know just what kind of a dire situation it was. Some of these buildings literally had been—the maintenance had been deferred, they were starting to deteriorate pretty significantly. They all needed to be painted, they needed new roofs, the infrastructure was shot, they didn't have heating and ventilation and air conditioning. And John Burchill painted this picture for the congressman and Congressman Moakley essentially said, “John, what can I do?”

And that began a long and successful partnership that lasted about fifteen years between the superintendent of the national park here and the congressman. And Congressman Moakley was able to secure funding to the tune of about approximately fifty million dollars to address some of those maintenance shortfalls and concerns having to do with these historic structures. And so working together, John Burchill and Congressman Moakley were able to restore—rehabilitate, restore, pretty much bring into the twentieth century some of these great, national icons.

MULLER: Do you know of any of the specific legislation that he worked with, like bills and things like that or was it just—?

HENNESSEY: No, I'd have to do more research on that, but I do know that he secured appropriations. As you know, Congressman Moakley was the chair of the Rules Committee and held a great deal of power in that position.² He held the gavel, and a lot of horse trading was done, and he was able to get appropriations to the tune of seven million dollars here, twelve million dollars there, six million dollars. And he did it that way, which quite frankly caused a little bit of consternation within the National Park Service because here was this sort of free-wheeling superintendent who wasn't following the normal process where you go to the powers that be in Washington and it's "Mother, may I?" and you wait in line for your small handout as part of the regular line item construction program or the moneys that have been set aside to address the

² The House Rules Committee is responsible for the scheduling of bills for discussion in the House of Representatives. According to the Rules Committee website, “bills are scheduled by means of special rules from the Rules Committee that bestow upon legislation priority status for consideration in the House and establish procedures for their debate and amendment.” (See <http://www.rules.house.gov/>) Congressman Moakley was a member of the House Rules Committee from 1975 to 2001 and served as its chairman from 1989 to 1995.

maintenance backlog. John Burchill kind of did an end run around that process, and he went right to the source and he got a lot of this money working directly with Congressman Moakley.

And so some in the National Park Service didn't really appreciate that route that he was taking. But John was very much a maverick, John Burchill. He was entrepreneurial, and he wanted to get the job done, and he wanted to “pull the trigger,” as he'd say. And he saw a way to do it working closely with a congressman who was very agreeable and amendable to helping with these buildings that are under our stewardship and are our responsibility, that are of national significance.

MULLER: Did Moakley ever give any indication why he supported it, or he just said, “What can I do to help?”

HENNESSEY: He realized—I think Congressman Moakley growing up—I'm speculating now; this is all my opinion. But [he was] a lifelong resident of Boston, grew up in South Boston, modest means, and I think he really was proud of the heritage here and had a real connection to the city, to his neighborhood, to his people. And he was proud of all that we have to offer here, and proud of the fact that people come from all over the country to visit these places here that we take care of because this is where it all began. This is the real deal. This is not a virtual tour of American history; this is the bricks and mortar. And he wanted to make sure we were doing our job preserving and protecting these places and making them accessible and available to the American citizens who are paying for them, and also people from all over the world who come here to visit these places and learn about American history and the birth of the United States.

So he had a real strong connection to his city; he had a sense of place, a sense of community, and he had a great deal of pride, as do many, if not most Bostonians. They're proud of the fact that they live in this city and that we've been able to take care of it so well. Where other cities have maybe not done so well, Boston has continually reinvented itself and we look to do things a little differently. And certainly, John Burchill, who was cut from the same cloth as Joe Moakley—I think they were kindred spirits and they both had this real love for American history, Boston history and all that we had contributed. They had a love for their similar backgrounds. They were both Irish; John Burchill's parents were from Ireland. I think they had a lot in common, and John educated the

congressman somewhat on the significance of these sites and how we really needed to take care of them, and the congressman was in a position where he could help and he wanted to help, and he did help.

MULLER: So you said that before Congressman Moakley got involved, all the sites and everything were really deteriorating and everything. Was there any specific reason for that or was it just they had been neglected?

HENNESSEY: I wouldn't even use the word neglected; it's like if you own a house, you set priorities. You know, "I'll do the roof this year, and then I won't be able to paint it for another couple of years." It's just limited funding resources. It's an era of diminished federal funding, and this has been going on for decades now. You have to look at different funding sources whether it's through public/private partnerships, or how you do it, it's just the American treasury—our treasure is just not there. Particularly now, I mean, everyone knows we've got hurricane disasters, and we're fighting wars, and there have been tax cuts, and all this kind of thing. There just isn't the money to take care of these kinds of places. So I wouldn't say benign neglect, but I would say deferred maintenance. And it takes a great deal to take care of these places. We, at the National Park Service, are like the nation's antique collectors; it's like we've got attics filled with stuff, whether it's Thomas Edison's recordings or it's historic monuments, and it's not easy taking care of all this stuff.

MULLER: This is just to kind of jump back to Dorchester Heights—what exactly is Dorchester Heights?

HENNESSEY: Dorchester Heights Monument is a beautiful marble monument that dates from the early nineteenth hundreds, but it's erected on the site where General George Washington and Colonel Henry Knox essentially forced the British to evacuate the town of Boston in 1776. On March 17, 1776, the British ended their long siege and boarded their ships and fled Massachusetts, fled Boston. They were forced out because Henry Knox and George Washington fortified Dorchester Heights with cannons that they had dragged down from Fort Ticonderoga. March seventeenth is a holiday in the city of Boston and Suffolk County; it's known as Evacuation Day. It

also coincidentally happens to be St. Patrick's Day, which is a big holiday in South Boston. So this site in South Boston marks the place where the fortifications were erected and the British were forced to evacuate Boston in 1776.

MULLER: And the harbor islands are not part of the Boston National Historic Park, they're separate?

HENNESSEY: No, each of the 388 units of the National Park System are unique and separate and of national significance in and of themselves. So the harbor islands are a wonderful, natural resource in Boston Harbor. Boston National Historical Park is a cultural resource in the city of Boston; separate units, separate entities with their own management and their own funding. Each of these little parks—some are not so little; you look at Yosemite and Yellowstone and Acadia—each of these units is separate and distinct in and of itself.

MULLER: Okay. But Moakley was involved with the harbor islands, right?

HENNESSEY: Yes, Congressman Moakley—and there's an interesting anecdote—for years he had been saying how back in the 1960s, he had fought a proposal to have some kind of a World's Fair out on the Boston Harbor Islands. And coincidentally, my father was principal at a school in Dorchester, a Boston public school. My father tended to collect a lot of things—he's a historian himself—and he had dug out this article from a local Dorchester newspaper that dated to 1969 and I found a copy of it, it was from the *Milton Record Transcript*, and it's Thursday, March 6, 1969. And this is at the time when Congressman Moakley was a state senator representing the Fourth Suffolk District,³ and he was chair of the special legislative committee on the Boston Harbor Islands, and he opposed this initiative to have some kind of a World's Fair on the Boston Harbor Islands. I found that old news clipping and I gave it to the congressman. He was ecstatic. He had it framed and put it in his office, and he called my father at his home to thank him. And I made a copy of that for you [attachment A].

MULLER: Thank you.

³ Moakley served in the Massachusetts State Senate from 1964 to 1970.

HENNESSEY: You're welcome. So his interest in the Boston Harbor Islands goes back as far as the 1960s, when the islands were part of a state park system, part of the Metropolitan District Commission.⁴ And many people from Boston, South Boston, Dorchester, wherever, would go out to the harbor islands, out to Georges Island,⁵ and were familiar with some of the legends and myths associated with the Harbor Islands. And Congressman Moakley was no different from any other citizen; he had a great interest in this kind of thing, so his interest in the Harbor Islands goes way back.

MULLER: And he was also—since it's part of the Boston National Historic Park, the Charlestown Navy Yard and the *USS Constitution*—do you think the fact that he was in the navy had something to do with him wanting to preserve those or do you think that was just another part of him, in general, just wanting to help the situation?

HENNESSEY: Pure speculation on my part? Sure, yeah, absolutely. He was in the navy and Boston used to be a big navy town during the Second World War. I mean, South Station would be packed with young men and women heading off from South Station to go and join the war effort. The Charlestown Navy Yard is really our last vestige in Boston, today, of that proud, navy town feel, you know, that big muscular working port that was the city of Boston. And now everything has been gentrified and it's nothing but condominiums and marinas along the waterfront. And the Navy Yard—the park service's portion of the Charlestown Navy Yard is the last vestige of that, with working cranes and guys in hard hats taking care of the *USS Constitution*, and all that kind of thing. Wonderful museum facility over there. *USS Constitution* Museum interprets the ship, tells the story of the ship. So yeah, I'm sure—I'm speculating that there is some kind of connection due to the fact that he had served in the navy.

⁴ In 1966, while he was a serving on the Massachusetts State Senate, Moakley was appointed chair of the Special Commission on the Boston Harbor Islands. In 1970, he successfully proposed legislation to create the Boston Harbor Islands State Park in order to unify the islands and streamline their management. During his congressional career, he co-sponsored several pieces of legislation, the first in 1976, to have the harbor islands designated as a national park. His efforts ultimately proved successful when the Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area was established in 1996.

⁵ Georges Island is the site of Fort Warren, which was dedicated in 1847 and used by the U.S. government for military training and patrol. It was also used as a prison for Confederate soldiers during the Civil War.

MULLER: How do you think historic preservation in Boston has progressed since Moakley was around and since he made all those contributions, I guess, to the city?

HENNESSEY: Has anyone stepped in to fill the void, essentially?

MULLER: Yeah.

HENNESSEY: Well, I think Boston has been blessed with a very strong preservation community that dates well back into the nineteenth century. I know the association that was formed to save Mount Vernon was really the beginning of the preservation movement. But here in Boston in, I believe it was around 1876, there was a proposal to move the Old State House to Chicago, brick by brick. And I think that's when a group of people got together and said no. Time out. And that's when the Bostonian Society was founded as an organization that was going to operate as a museum of the city of Boston and also preserve and protect the Old State House.

So I think since then, since the 1870s, we've really enjoyed this strong sense of historic preservation. And I know that even in the 1950s and the 1960s, during the great urban renewal push that was taking place all over the United States, there were efforts to save a great many buildings that would have otherwise gone under the wrecking ball. They couldn't save the West End, they couldn't save Scollay Square, but I know that, for instance, a group of citizens were able to save the Sears Crescent Building, which is opposite city hall in Government Center. And similarly, I believe the Boston Preservation Alliance was formed in the 1970s—it's operated under the leadership of Susan Park. Their office is in the Old City Hall building on School Street, which is another example of a structure that was saved and preserved. So I think we've been a little better off than other cities. If you go to a city such as St. Louis or Denver, they lost a lot of their historic fabric. I think we've been able to preserve a lot more of it.

Now since Congressman Moakley passed, no one's really stepped into the void to fill those shoes vis-à-vis big appropriations. Of course we had Tip O' Neill,⁶ we had Speaker McCormack,⁷ we had Joe Moakley; that era's over, that's long gone. I would like to flag an initiative that's underway right now that's being spearheaded by a Republican congressman from Indiana whose name is Mark Souder, S-O-U-D-E-R, and he has introduced legislation that's called the National Park Centennial Act of 2005. And this legislation calls for full funding for the National Park Service by the year 2016, which will be the park service's hundredth birthday. And he has introduced this bill which has wide bipartisan support—it has the support of Congressman Barney Frank⁸—and he's been holding a number of field hearings. The first field hearing was held in Gettysburg in March, the second was in Washington, D.C., in April, he held one in here in Boston in July—excuse me, in August of this year, 2005. And he's looking at, in a comprehensive way, the funding needs of the National Park Service.

The way this law will work is that citizens will be able to have a voluntary check off on their income taxes where they can donate money that will then go to the National Park Service that will help us. So there's a congressman from Indiana who represents a district where there isn't even a national park unit, but he's very much interested in this subject and what this agency does. And particularly, when he held the field hearing here in Boston in Faneuil Hall in August, he was interested in historic preservation and how we do it, how we don't do it, what our needs are. And testifying at that field hearing were someone from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which is headed up by a fellow named Richard Moe. It's a national organization.

So I think there still is a pretty strong preservation community, especially here in Boston. I think the Boston Preservation Alliance does a good job, the National Trust for Historic Preservation does a good job, the National Park Service does a pretty good job. I mean, we do what we can with

⁶ Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill (1912-1994), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Eleventh and, after redistricting, Eighth Congressional Districts in the United States House of Representatives from 1953 to 1987. He served as Speaker of the House of Representatives from 1977 to 1987.

⁷ John W. McCormack (1891-1990), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Twelfth and, after redistricting, Ninth Congressional Districts in the United States House of Representatives from 1928 to 1971. He served as Speaker of the House from 1962 to 1971.

⁸ Barnett "Barney" Frank (1940-), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts' Fourth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1981.

limited funding and no hope (laughs) for any kind of an increase in the immediate future; you know, we do what we can with what we've got.

MULLER: Before you worked for the National Park Service, what did you do? Were you involved with the same kind of thing?

HENNESSEY: No. It's interesting—I had a completely different career. I worked for ten years as a social worker at a drug and alcohol detoxification center in Mattapan. This was during the 1980s, during the height of traumatic epidemics having to do with crack cocaine, and alcohol abuse, and heroin addiction, and the rise of HIV and AIDS. It was really an interesting time to be involved in social work. I worked there for ten years, which was kind of unusual; it's a profession that has a high burn out rate and a lot of turn over. But I stayed there. I went back to school and got a master's degree at UMass Boston, and then I was out interviewing and I was put in touch with John Burchill, and he said, “I want you to come work for me,” and so that's how I started working for the National Park Service.

MULLER: What did you get your master's degree in?

HENNESSEY: English.

MULLER: Were you specifically interested in the National Park Service?

HENNESSEY: No, I was interested in American history and I had taken a great number of courses as an undergraduate and a graduate student in colonial American literature, the literature of the working class; I had studied African American literature. And so it was just a perfect fit. It helped that, in John Burchill's eyes, that I was a local guy who had good local connections, and knew the lay of the land, and knew how things worked in this town, and it is a small town. And I had a good educational background and I was interested in historic preservation and American history. He just saw it as a perfect fit and he really wanted me to come work for him.

MULLER: Do you know how John Burchill and Joe Moakley knew each other?

HENNESSEY: They were related distantly—Joe Moakley's secretary, Molly Hurley, was a distant cousin of John Burchill's.

MULLER: Okay.

HENNESSEY: Did you know that?

MULLER: I did, I think; I interviewed Molly Hurley last semester.⁹

HENNESSEY: Oh, you did?

MULLER: Yeah, she didn't mention that I don't think but—

HENNESSEY: And her husband of course is the infamous Wacko.

MULLER: Yeah, I read an interview between them.¹⁰ Alright, earlier you had said you worked with his staff, with Moakley's staff—

HENNESSEY: Fred Clark was terrific.¹¹ He was his local administrative assistant—I believe that was his title. He was his advance man, he was his right hand man. Fred Clark was just a gem; he was terrific. And also Joe Moynihan¹²—I pulled out some speaking remarks that Congressman Moakley delivered in 1998 in Faneuil Hall, when we dedicated a plaque to him, and I think Joe Moynihan wrote those. Joe Moynihan wrote a lot of his speeches. I'll make a copy of that one for you. I don't think I kept a copy of that for myself. You can have that one and I'll send you a copy of this one [attachment B].

⁹ OH-046 of the Moakley Oral History Project is an interview with Margaret “Molly” Hurley, who was Moakley’s secretary from 1977 to 2001.

¹⁰ OH-019 of the Moakley Oral History Project is an interview with Molly Hurley and her husband, John “Wacko” Hurley.

¹¹ Fred Clark was a member of Moakley’s district staff from 1986 to 2001. OH-020 and OH-061 of the Moakley Oral History Project are interviews with Fred Clark.

¹² Joseph Moynihan was Moakley’s staff assistant at his Brockton office from 1993 to 2001.

MULLER: Okay, so Fred Clark and Joe Moynihan. Well, that's good—I'm interviewing Fred Clark next week.

HENNESSEY: Oh okay. Tell him Sean Hennessey said hello.

MULLER: Okay. I will. Let me just look through my notes a little more. I've gone through all my questions so I guess I can just start to wrap up a little bit. Do the people at the park service now—do they still remember Joe Moakley and everything that he did or are they just moving on and doing what they have to do now?

HENNESSEY: Those of us who were around remember him fondly and with great sadness that he's gone and the era that he represents is gone too. It was a real turning point for us, and it was an honor when he died when both the sitting president and the former president both came to the funeral in the modest community of South Boston. And Al Gore was there, who had just been defeated by the new president; George Bush was there, Bill Clinton was there, Al Gore was there. The people that came to pay tribute to this man, it just spoke volumes to the way he was able to work in a bipartisan way and get things done.

There's some wonderful pieces—I'll make a copy of this for you too. Seth Gitell wrote a nice piece that was in the Wall Street Journal that appeared on June 6, 2001; his piece was titled "A Dying Breed: Was Joe Moakley the last of the blue-collar Democrats?" and I'll make a copy of that for you too [attachment C]. Seth Gitell now, interestingly, is Mayor [Thomas] Menino's press secretary; he's working for the city. We have a local in-house publication—it was a quarterly publication at the time—and I made a copy of the article that the deputy superintendent, Peter Steele, wrote about Joe Moakley, and that really sums up the history of his association with the Park. Peter Steele worked closely with him because Peter oversaw a lot of the development projects. And then when Congressman Moakley died, John Burchill wrote—had me write a letter to the editor of the *[Boston] Globe* which was published in the *Globe* on Saturday, June second, which also was his way of saying thank you to the congressman [attachment D].

Dusty Rhodes worked closely with Congressman Moakley over the years too; you know who she is, right?

MULLER: No, I don't think so.

HENNESSEY: Dusty Rhodes is a special event planner in the city of Boston. She's organized most of the major Tall Ship visits. And her office is in South Boston at the Design Center on the waterfront. She worked pretty closely with Congressman Moakley. She handled the arrangements for his funeral, as a matter of fact. And then you have all this stuff from the archives, the program from his funeral and—

MULLER: Yup, they've given me a lot.

HENNESSEY: Good, good.

MULLER: Okay, well I think I've gotten what I need to, so thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate it.

HENNESSEY: You're welcome, sure, you're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

OH-060 Attachments

- Attachment A** “Moakley Opposes ‘Pie In The Sky’ World’s Fair,” *Milton Record-Transcript*, March 6, 1969.
- Attachment B** “Remarks of Congressman Joe Moakley: Faneuil Hall Plaque Dedication,” May 29, 1998
- Attachment C** Gitell, Seth, “A Dying Breed: Was Joe Moakley the last of the blue-collar Democrats?” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 6, 2001.
- Attachment D** Burchill, John, “Letters to the Editor: Another Legacy from Moakley,” *The Boston Globe*, June 2, 2001.