

Freeman Funk: Third City Manager of Fredericksburg (Part IV) --
3/25/2006

By Suzanne Volinski, CRRL Intern, editor
Interviewed by Nancy Bruns

(Session 2, Tape 2, Side A, May 21, 1999)

Interviewer: We're talking about the Wallace Library and the Lafayette School.

Freeman Funk: Our use of the old building when it was vacant was for a staff meeting for a motivational series. It was the first we had ever heard of such a thing. We participated and had our technical staff come and participate in that. It worked out very well. The reason I remember it is that I'd never heard of such a thing before.

Interviewer: I don't think I've ever heard of it at all. Tell me what it's about.

Freeman Funk: Well a psychologist led a discussion on TV on what motivated people to be good employees. How could you get more work out of people without offending them?

Interviewer: Was that something the state sponsored?

Freeman Funk: No, we paid a fee to get this off of cable TV. Cable was new too. I do remember it was a nice way to get some ideas across, presented by an outsider. I wanted to add about the reuse of old city owned buildings -- I got to thinking about this one time and it is still true. There has not been a new, architect-designed, city-owned building built in the 20th century in Fredericksburg. Yes, we use them over and over and over. It just seems that that is an acceptable thing in Fredericksburg. I was disappointed when City Council decided -- this was the beginning of the regional library system. I recommended a tract of land and they said well go ahead and see if you can buy the land to put it on. I came back to them and said one piece I can't buy but we could condemn it. They said let's do something else. I still think as good as the Lafayette (Wallace) Library has turned out to be, it could have been a better facility for about the same money in a building built specifically to be a library. If they had done it that way they wouldn't have been too cramped, unable to function efficiently and giving great thought to moving elsewhere. You know, city managers don't have a great deal of influence. They do the best they can. The

decision makers have to remain the City Council. And that's the way it works. That's the system.

Interviewer: When you have a regional library you have a lot of different political forces in there.

Freeman Funk: Yes you do.

Interviewer: Let's talk about City Hall.

Freeman Funk: About City Hall preservation. One time I was outside of City Hall and there were two men standing looking at the building and one of them said, "Man that is an ugly building." The building was painted a gray and over the front door in large block letters in white it said "City Hall." And it was a bad looking building.

Interviewer: It had been there forever?

Freeman Funk: This was in the '50s that this happened and of course it was built in 1814... Historically the War of 1812 was going on when this was built. It had been painted on the outside -- gray because the original brick was absorbent and you couldn't keep plaster on the inside because the rainwater was just seeping on through. So they decided they better paint it and repainted and it was fairly ugly. I thought maybe it could be renovated on the exterior at least, so I set about studying things that had happened and I found that the bell tower on the campus of the State Capitol had been a painted building. The company had developed a skill in doing this and with a soft aggregate-that is not as hard as sand nor as soft as rice- a material could be used to sandblast the building and not erode the building so much. So we engaged them to do that and now it's a nice looking brick structure with a sandstone base. There's a problem with the base. ... It's sandstone and it's constantly eroding either from acid rain-- whatever erodes that. The Capitol of the United States was made of sandstone from Aquia... but at one time they decided they were going to replace the Capitol's stone with Vermont marble. And they took all the sandstone off I visited the Architect of the Capitol and I told him what we were doing. We were renovating a building and we need some sandstone and this historic sandstone would be ideal for steps in front. Instead of concrete, nice Aquia sandstone steps. The Architect said it sounds like a great idea, but it'll never happen. "We're numbering each one of these pieces and we'll put them in storage and they'll remain there forever." I have great photographs of these numbers and pieces that I couldn't get! But anyway we went on with

our efforts and we made it waterproof with silicone which may or may not have been a good idea. And as you know it did become a museum and is preserved inside and outside with great care after falling into disuse when the city decided to abandon it and take up quarters in the abandoned Post Office. You see the words "abandoned" and "reuses" all through the city history. And that is the time one member was so enamored of the Post Office because he had worked there for so many years, and he thought that would be just great if the city could get it. I made an effort to get it. I hoped the effort wouldn't succeed.

Interviewer: But you got it.

Freeman Funk: I got it.

Interviewer: Is that about a '30s building? The Post Office.

Freeman Funk: Probably. There was at the time available a recently completed building, a non-occupied building called Executive Office Plaza. Seven stories, central air conditioning, elevators. Nice office building. It was a speculative building... and it became apparent we could buy it. I mentioned it to the council, and they said, "Well it's too big. What will we put in it?" I said well I'll come back. So my assistant and I studied it and we came up with a list of possible tenants. Some of them materialized later. We didn't get it. Council said no that's just more building than we need. So instead they spent the money - (Executive Office Plaza was offered at about a million dollars and I think they were afraid that would bail out the owner, and they didn't want anybody to profit.)

Interviewer: Was the Executive Office Plaza as controversial at the time it was built?

Freeman Funk: Sure. It was a modern building... But it was there. The new Post Office is a modern building, too. And the National Bank, it's a horribly modern building. It got away from its beautiful old building downtown because it was too small. It was impractical. You can't run a big bank in a little building. But you do what you have to do. I don't blame the National Bank for not building a historic looking building. That would have been absurd out where it is. I think the city could have gotten along well in the space (Executive Office Plaza) and could have rented out every square foot. It rented immediately. So what they did was to move into the old Post Office, disregarded their own laws about off-street parking and reduced the number of parking spaces available.

Interviewer: But you weren't city manager then?

Freeman Funk: No, but I know there was parking for 20 or more vehicles in the basement. When you convert that to offices that's 20 spaces gone-contrary to the law. But that's the way it works. Politics is a strange thing.

Interviewer: This brings us to discuss what happened to you about 1978. We talked last week about how you worked without a contract.

Freeman Funk: Yes, that's right.

Interviewer: You'd been city manager for 23 years.

Freeman Funk: Twenty-three years. And the council simply decided it was not the will and pleasure to have me as city manager. So they said, "You're out." That's the way it works.

Interviewer: But there's more to it than that. Surely, it didn't just happen that suddenly?

Freeman Funk: Well it did. Pretty suddenly. I didn't know it was going to happen. No one on the council told me that it might come up at that meeting.

Interviewer: Had you been at odds with some of them for some time?

Freeman Funk No, not at all... But that is not unusual. It happens in business and municipal corporations all the time. We'd just had a council election in June. And that was not an issue.

Interviewer: The city manager was not the issue?

Freeman Funk: No. Not the form of government nor the incumbent were not issues. So it was a little bit of a surprise and disappointment.

Interviewer: I guess it was. Freeman Funk: I guess they knew I had been considering other offers. And one was the Rappahannock Service Authority which maybe we'll need to talk about too.

Interviewer: Yes, we should. Was that where you went?

Freeman Funk: No. It turned out that it did not materialize. It was to be a regional authority to handle sewer and water and wastewater

problems for the two counties and the city. And any other thing that might be regionalized. It just fell apart. Not because of me. But there were some overtures. I had come to the point of looking for office space...

Interviewer: So council had a general sense that you might be going to leave?

Freeman Funk: It could be. Let me describe for you the conditions that existed. The nation had on its mind Watergate. The city had on its mind the closing of FMC, the major industry, which happened about that time. The absolute closing of the major industry. Also, the failure of the city to attract the mall. It went to the county instead. A downtown public street renovation that really didn't go too well. There were some errors in the plans, and there was some criticism about how that project turned out. All in all there was just enough there to put together a picture that they wanted someone else to be city manager. And that was all right with me.

Interviewer: It must have been a tremendous shock.

Freeman Funk: It was. If I had done it at my leisure I would have had a job lined up. It turned out for my career to be a blessing. Maybe I should have made changes long ago. I stayed too long. The tenure in the United States for city managers is 2.3 years, and I'd been in there for 23 years. [Ten times as long.] But the city was used to long tenure. Mr. Houston had been there 30 years. This wasn't unusual for Fredericksburg. It didn't have a whole lot of history for that (fast turnover) After all, I was the third city manager the city ever had. Interruption while newspaper clippings are looked at.

Interviewer: We should have said all this occurred in 1978.

Freeman Funk: You had mentioned the Virginia Central Railway as an issue. I never understood that. I don't think Mrs. Massey (Councilwoman Massey) ever understood it either. And I got a letter from Stuart Shumate, president of the RF&P railway, and he didn't understand it either. It was all some sort of misunderstanding. I want to add I stayed in Fredericksburg too long.

Interviewer: You mean as city manager too long.

Freeman Funk: Yes, but I liked Fredericksburg. I liked the people. After getting fired, I decided to stay on. This firing was harder on my

wife than it was on me. She didn't understand it, but I understood it because I understood the system. With tenures of 2.3 years in the United States, city managers get fired every day.

Interviewer: Big turnover?

Freeman Funk: Yes. You're supposed to move on and move up. Many of these changes were voluntary. Some were not. Major corporations suffer the same thing. Chief executive officers get fired or resign. You have to satisfy the board. I had several offers. Some were interesting... the one that truly interested me came from Chuck Sharp, county executive for Stafford. He'd been a student of mine at North Carolina State College and then was city forester for the City of Fredericksburg. He had a federal grant and wanted to know if I'd be interested in filling it. That worked out for me and then I worked as a contract employee for Stafford.

Freeman Funk: ... I then went on to know the people in the engineering firm of Russell and Axon, a firm doing contract work for Stafford, and did some some part time work for them and they asked me if I'd come on to be manager of their branch office in Fredericksburg and I worked there until we closed the office ... I found out I should have been doing some engineering-the career I was trained for-all along. But I don't regret a moment I ever spent in local government.

Interviewer: Now tell me about the elected part of this. (Mr. Funk served on City Council from 1993 until 1998-filling an unexpired term and then being elected to a full term in office.)

Freeman Funk: Twenty years went by.

Interviewer: Yes. Well not quite 20. Freeman Funk: ... This is so recent that maybe you know about it. Council had been reduced in size to seven members from the one I dealt with and no committees. A member of the council resigned, and there were six and they needed to appoint someone and they couldn't seem to get together on it. The vote was three to three. Three to three. Same three. And they were about at the point when the judge was going to appoint someone. I got in touch with a member- I knew all of them ... one was the one who voted to fire me so I thought he wasn't the one I ought to ask.

Interviewer: Why did you want to do it?

Freeman Funk: Well... I thought I had some background that would be useful to the city, so I called him up and I said if it would help you at all and if you think it would work I'll finish out that term, if he could get me appointed. I knew I'd have three votes, and he was on the other team. And he said, "Oh would you? I'm going to bring your name up tonight." They brought it up and it went through like that. There are more stories that follow on that. About serving on the council, serving and sitting next to the man who had voted to fire me--- but I don't think they'd be of historical interest.

Interviewer: I read in the paper that you say you always got along fine.

Freeman Funk: Hmm, hmn.