



Sheila Eddy Baker

This is Nancy Bruns and today is Nov. 17, 2008. I am with Sheila Baker at her home on Prince Edward Street. As part of Historic Fredericksburg Foundation's oral history project, we are going to talk about Fredericksburg, but we plan to concentrate on public issues and especially issues during the period when Sheila served as a legislative aide to former State Senator John H. Chichester. We will deal very little with partisan politics although this interview partially covers the period when Senator Chichester was one of nine Republicans serving in the 40-member Virginia Senate and moves to the period when Republicans become the majority party. Senator Chichester retired in January of 2008 after more than 29 years in the General Assembly. The Virginia 28th Senatorial District today includes Fauquier (part), Fredericksburg (part), King George, Lancaster, Northhampton, Stafford, Prince William (part), Richmond, and Westmoreland Counties.

Interviewer: I know from our earlier conversation that you—like I—are not a native of Fredericksburg. When did you come to Fredericksburg?

Sheila Baker: My husband and I came to Fredericksburg in 1962 when he finished law

school at the University of Virginia.

Interviewer: This was your husband's (Leland L. "Bud" Baker Jr.) first job?

Sheila Baker: This was not his first job. He had been with U.S. Steel in Chicago for several years before he decided to go to law school. But this was his first job in the legal profession.

Interviewer: How had you all met? When you were students at William and Mary?

Sheila Baker: I went to William and Mary and he went to the University of Virginia and we met while we were home for the holidays at a Christmas party. I was from Staunton and he was from Waynesboro, both in Augusta County.

Interviewer: And when were you married?

Sheila Baker: We were married in 1956. Fifty-two years ago to the day of today.

Interviewer: Oh congratulations.... And then after you were married you went to Chicago?

Sheila Baker: Yes, we lived in Chicago from 1956 to 1959 and my husband decided to go to law school and then when he finished law school in 1962 we moved to Fredericksburg.

Interviewer: And how did he pick Fredericksburg? I don't know how lawyers get jobs.

Sheila Baker: You go by the placement office at the law school and you look to see what postings there are—what firms are looking for associates. And he noticed the Fredericksburg posting. We wanted to stay in Virginia and we wanted to be not too far away from Augusta County and we did not want to be in a terribly rural area. Fredericksburg was 50 miles from Washington and 50 miles from Richmond and about 110 miles from our families so this seemed like a good place.

Interviewer: You did not come to this house though?

Sheila Baker: No, we rented a house on Brent Street near the college and then we bought a small house on Brompton Street near Maury School. And then we came here.

Interviewer: When you came to Fredericksburg as a newcomer did Frances Hewetson (well known preservationist who was also a "come here" and the Welcome Wagon Lady) come to visit you?

Sheila Baker: She came to see me as the Welcome Wagon Lady and she immediately mentioned the League of Women Voters. But the thing that most people who came to Fredericksburg at that time seemed to gravitate to was the American Association of University Women. That had a large membership and when people realized that you had gone to college they immediately invited you to join that and I did.

Interviewer: Did you join the League of Women Voters?

Sheila Baker: Yes I did join the League of Women Voters, but that was a much smaller organization and it always struggled somewhat in Fredericksburg. But we always tried to have a Candidates' meeting before each election and always tried to get out non-partisan information on the elections.

Interviewer: Mrs. Hewetson was not league president at the time you joined ?

Sheila Baker: Probably not. But she immediately mentioned it to me. She was always on the lookout for recruits for the league.

I had been aware of the league in Charlottesville but had not joined because we were just there for a short time. The first two years I had worked at the medical school and the third year I had a small baby so I did not need any organizations to belong to.

But I was aware that the league was a very worthwhile organization. There were a number of faculty wives—women whose husbands were on the faculty at Mary Washington College—who did belong to the league and also of the AAUW, more in AAUW than the league.

But there was a core of very hardworking people in the league.

Interviewer: Were there local issues that league members worked on? I do know they, under the leadership of Mrs. Hewetson, worked on preservation issues in connection with establishing the city's early historic district.

Sheila Baker: City Council matters would come along. Sometimes zoning. Sometimes historic preservation work.

One thing we worked a lot on at one time was getting school buses at Hugh Mercer School because at the time that school was built Fredericksburg did not provide any transportation to and from schools at all and Hugh Mercer was located across a busy highway and it was proving very difficult for a lot of people to get children to school. You would just have these station wagons crammed with children which people were driving up there.

Interviewer: And it is a bad highway.

Sheila Baker: Yes. It was just a much more congested area than they had ever had a school in. The school board was not anxious to get into the transportation business. It was one thing that the league and the Parent Teacher Association were interested in.

Interviewer: And you did get buses.

Sheila Baker: We did and they did try to figure out how to avoid having them for everyone right away. When they first started out they worked it by grades and they first offered buses for the first through third grades and then when kindergarten was added, they added that. And of course it happened that the first through third grades were all at the same school. Eventually they did offer transportation for every student.

Interviewer: What about kindergarten? Was that a league issue?

Sheila Baker: I don't remember that as a league issue. But kindergarten came along and there was some controversy or discussion about whether it would be half day or full day. It may have been state mandated... but certainly when we first came here there was not public kindergarten. You sent your child to private kindergarten and there were a number of them. I sent mine (William Taylor Baker) to Lawrence which Betty Poole ran. Our younger son

(Thomas Witt Baker) would have been the first group in public kindergarten but I was so pleased with Lawrence that I did not want to experiment so he went to Lawrence. And of course immediately as public kindergarten was instituted the number of private kindergartens started to fall off.

Interviewer: In thinking about the issue of school buses, it seems to me that Fredericksburg in the 1960s must have been a small town without the congestion and the tourists we have today.

Sheila Baker: It was a small town, but you always had the tourists in Fredericksburg. But there hadn't been quite the organized effort to attract them like now with a city position to head it up. But you can read back many years in old accounts and old guidebooks: Fredericksburg has always been a place for history lovers.

Interviewer: That's certainly true.

Sheila Baker: Yes and when you look back into the accounts of Historic Garden Week why you realize that there have always been places people have wanted to see in Fredericksburg.

Interviewer: What would be an example?

Sheila Baker: Chatham. The Sentry Box, although at one time it was very much in need of restoration, it was an historic location. They would still occasionally find a grave of a soldier on the property. If you were aware of history you were just aware of those spots. And they had a lot of reunions of veterans-- of Confederate veterans in Fredericksburg.

Interviewer: Had history been your major at William and Mary?

Sheila Baker: No actually it was economics.... But I had grown up with history.

Interviewer: Staunton is not extremely Civil War oriented so you hadn't grown up with with the Civil War there or had you?

Sheila Baker: No not particularly, but I had grown up with it in that my mother had an older brother, Thomas William Zink Jr., who was inordinately fond of Civil War history. He had in fact heard his own grandfather (Peter L. Huddleston of Bedford County, Second Virginia Cavalry, later the 27th VA Regiment) tell first hand stories of the Civil War. He could go to any battleground and tell where each group stood and how they advanced and he had been in the Civil War Roundtable in Staunton. So of course as soon as I moved to Fredericksburg he came to visit on several occasions, and we would go to the battlefields and he would tell me about what had happened there.

I guess I was raised with a family of unreconstructed southerners. But I just always liked history.

Interviewer: And I know you like government.

Sheila Baker: Yes I like government. And I had a wonderful Latin teacher in high school

who made me very fond of ancient history so I just always enjoyed history.

Interviewer: Before we move on to the subject of government, I would like to veer off and ask about the Rappahannock Valley Garden Club. I know you belong and I wanted to ask about what a garden club does. Didn't they work on some of the gardens at historic homes?

Sheila Baker: Of course all the money raised statewide—and the Rappahannock Valley Garden Club is the area member of the Garden Club of Virginia—all the Garden Week money is used for restoration and preservation of historic gardens. And they have been doing this for 75 years now. On three occasions, the Mary Washington House has received money from the Garden Club of Virginia. They installed our sprinkler system for us, they helped design the garden. They have their own landscape designer who will assist historic properties in designing the gardens. They will do extensive research to find the remains of gardens at historic houses and bring them back. And if they cannot bring them back then they will try to do one that is historically appropriate to the building. The Mary Washington Monument on Washington Avenue has been done with Garden Week money and was renovated and refurbished with Garden Week money. Belmont has been a recent recipient of Garden Week money and they have replaced a lot of gardens as Mrs. Melchers had them and Garden Week money has also help to return a lot of land to meadow as the Melchers had it when they lived there. The Melchers apparently liked the appearance of blooming meadows and seeing the deer and small animals.

Interviewer: Had gardening been something you were particularly interested in when you all came here?

Sheila Baker: My mother was always a gardener and we always went to see historic houses where ever we were. And of course Kenmore was the first recipient of Garden Week money and on several occasions. So the Mary Washington Monument, the Mary Washington House, Kenmore, and Belmont have all benefitted from money raised through Garden Week. They try to spread it statewide in fair way.

There is a restoration committee of very hardworking ladies within the Garden Club of Virginia and they select the gardens to receive money and they try to spread money around the state.

Interviewer: Is a garden nominated for assistance?

Sheila Baker: The restoration committee makes the decisions. The membership as a whole would not.

Interviewer: What do you do as a garden club member?

Sheila Baker: First of all you work on Garden Week one way or the other. You are either a head hostess or a guide or you take a bus group around or you do the flower arrangements which are quite extensive and require a number of people for each house. That's a first and

primary obligation.

They are very active in conservation work... I remember some years ago that garden clubs worked on the issue of billboards and keeping them away from the highways and preventing them from being on the interstates. *(Mrs. Baker said later that she recalled highway billboards being an issue in 1940s and early 1950s when her mother had belonged to a garden club in the Virginia Federation of Garden Clubs.)*

Certainly the Garden Club of Virginia has worked on that. They have a conservation forum every fall and they pick various issues that come to the forefront. This year's forum was concerned with the western part of the state where whole mountain tops are being removed to get to the coal. That's an issue that has just recently surfaced. Pesticides. Replanting green spaces. Wetlands. All of that has come under the influence of the conservation committee and we always make a point of letting our legislators know our positions and sometimes we've been fortunate and gotten things passed.

Interviewer: Were garden club issues one of the ones that led you to a legislative aide position with a member of the General Assembly?

Sheila Baker: Not particularly. We had known Senator Chichester since we came to Fredericksburg.

Interviewer: Through the law?

Sheila Baker: No not really. We had just become acquainted with him. We went to the Presbyterian Church and he had belonged to that since he was a child.

Fredericksburg wasn't that big a place. If you went out to a gathering, you were probably going to meet the same people. At one point my husband rented space in a building that Chichester Insurance owned and had his office there for several years. It was an association on several fronts. They had both served on the board at the National Bank. We were friends. We had just encountered each other on a number of occasions over the years.

Interviewer: And then in 1978 he was first elected.

Sheila Baker: Maybe 1979. He first went to the General Assembly when he took the seat of Senator Paul Mann of Bowling Green. Senator Mann died and John Chichester won the election to fill out the unexpired term of Senator Mann.

Interviewer: And that was the 28th. Was that configured pretty much the same way as it is now with the Northern Neck counties?

Sheila Baker: It's changed a lot. At one time it would have been Caroline with Senator Mann with Spotsylvania and Fredericksburg and Stafford. And then it was reconfigured and the Northern Neck was put in and Caroline was removed. And part of Prince William was put in.

Interviewer: And a little bit of Fredericksburg.

I do have a note that there was an election in 1978 so he probably took office in 1979.
And you did not go down with him right away?

Sheila Baker: I started in 1982 just part time. He had had other aides. Linda Hobgood had been his aide for a number of years and then she had had a second baby and she hoped to continue part time but it just did not work. With some reluctance, Linda was giving up the job. John actually just remarked one day that he was going to need an aide and somehow the conversation worked around to the fact that it was something that I might do.

He told me to come down and talk to him and he would explain what was required. And it seemed to work out that I had the interest and he was willing for me to try it.

It was very part time then. Only three mornings a week.

Interviewer: Was this still the time when the General Assembly only met every other year?

Sheila Baker: No they had gone to yearly sessions. Theoretically the session was 60 days and I think with legal provisions that it could be extended to 90 and then the law was changed to every year and the off year could be 30 days and could be extended to 45 days which it most usually is. But that had already taken place when I started.

Interviewer: Did you work here in town?

Sheila Baker: Oh yes. The family owned Chichester Insurance and it was his Uncle Daniel's business and John went into that business when he left Virginia Polytechnic Institute and came back to Fredericksburg. So it was a family business.

Interviewer: And he was already a Republican when you went to work for him?

Sheila Baker: Yes. The Chichesters had been conservative Democrats for many many years, but Daniel Chichester, the uncle, had already split himself away and become a Republican. So John ran as a Republican.

Interviewer: So he was in the minority in the Virginia Senate.

Sheila Baker: Oh yes, when I started working for him in 1982 there were nine Republican members out of 40.

Interviewer: So less than a quarter. Did they have any power at all?

Sheila Baker: Well, they could maybe get things done in committees. But not anything that the press took much notice of.

Interviewer: Was it a pretty civil situation?

Sheila Baker: Oh yes, there was always a feeling on partisanship but certainly the Senate staff made every effort (to get along). So far as the help and the workings of the Clerk of the Senate's office, they were always very very good (at seeing) that every senator got any request they had as far as the office went.

Interviewer: Did you actually have an office?

Sheila Baker: Here in Fredericksburg there was enough space at the insurance office that I

had the cubby hole for the Senate staffer. We had some files...

Interviewer: Would you get the mail?

Sheila Baker: There was always a lot of mail and a lot of invitations to things. Senator Chichester always wanted to see his mail and invitations first. But then he would then say what he wanted done with it. And a lot of constituent mail you would get so you knew how to answer it.

Interviewer: How did that work? Did you talk to him and make some notes? Did you have any sort of guide?

Sheila Baker: You sort of picked that up as time passes... so far as getting in contact with anyone in the state there is a full state directory of people.

Interviewer: You were doing constituent services then?

Sheila Baker: Yes, there are various constituent services. Of course the district included the Northern Neck.

The people down there are interested in water, boats, fishing, crabbing, and oystering. For example there was a great concern at one time when the oyster disease first became known when people first became aware that these things were sick and died.

It was a huge business. Essentially gone now.

Whenever there issues regarding fisheries– whether fishing or crabbing or anything– or sometimes there would be legislation brought from a conservation standpoint of saving these things and immediately it affected the watermen. There would be a tension there. Any legislation or change that affects someone’s livelihood always brings comment.

Interviewer: Did they come down?

Sheila Baker: I remember coming into the General Assembly once morning and the whole lobby was filled with watermen.

Interviewer: How could you tell?

Sheila Baker: Well you knew they were coming and they would come around in groups and you would know names and faces.

Interviewer: You went into that kind of cold. Living in Fredericksburg you wouldn’t have known a lot about water issues.

Sheila Baker: But you learn. And sometimes people just need help with finding something in vital records or it’s a boat license. Something like regulating the water systems of small towns would bring a lot of comment because it affected the cost of peoples’ utilities.

Sometimes you would hear from electric coops for the same reason. Regulations would affect the costs or the manner of doing business.

And of course when the state passed legislation setting up the child support enforcement agency we seemed to get about triple the number of constituent requests for help. There was a

great need for help in the child support enforcement area but when they passed the legislation they did not really realize how complicated it was going to be.

Interviewer: Do you mean in privacy areas?

Sheila Baker: Just getting the money from people. It had always been under the court system and it was becoming more than the court system could manage to follow up on--all the collections and so forth. They can't go out and see that this was paid particularly after there were Juvenile and Domestic Relations judges, there were so many rulings about child support but there was no way to get this money so they created a division of child support enforcement within Social Services. The original legislation did not cover the many pitfalls that there were in trying to collect this. People were in different states and different states had different ways of handling it. Everything eventually got computerized.

Interviewer: How do you collect it?

Sheila Baker: Now it is much better because there have been a couple of decades to get it worked out.

... But when the states first got into the business of enforcing the child support rulings it was complicated and they did not have all the answers and it was very difficult to carry out. You are never dealing with anyone that is happy to begin with and of course it is different and each state has a different way of pursuing this. It was a thorny issue and any legislative aide felt like their workload doubled as soon as that law went into effect.

Interviewer: You were hearing from constituents?

Sheila Baker: You heard from them constantly. Both sides constantly. And it showed to some extent that there was a need for this. But I don't think when they first passed that legislation it was realized how much need there was and how complicated it would be to make it work well.

Interviewer: What about home schooling? You and I talked about that at an earlier time.

Sheila Baker: That had just become an issue when Senator Chichester first went to the Senate. There was a senator named Adelard Brault who was the chairman of a study committee on home schooling. I think Senator Chichester was put on that committee. But it was the earliest beginnings of the effort to get permission from the state to allow home schooling.

Interviewer: Was it controversial?

Sheila Baker: Yes, it was controversial in that the State Department of Education was not too happy to see it come about.

Interviewer: They felt it weakened public education?

Sheila Baker: Probably that and there was going to have to be some means of testing to see that these people who were home schooled were indeed educated. But it was very interesting. At first you had people who might be considered somewhat liberal but did not like the quality

of public education and then gradually you got people who were very conversative and they just did not like the quality of education but they also had concerns about the social aspects of public schools.

But neither group had much organization if any at the beginning. When the issue started coming to the forefront at the legislature you would just get these letters from individual people and you would think “Who are these people and where are they coming from?” There is no office, there is no agency, there was no organization. It was just all of these individuals cropping up.

And of course over time they have formed their own associations and organizations and have quite a recognizable voice now. But when home schooling first came to the forefront the people doing this were responsible for truancy and it was illegal.

Interviewer: Oh, I understand. I hadn’t seen that.

Sheila Baker: If you were keeping your child out of school, you were in violation and you were breaking the law so that to be addressed.

Interviewer: I suppose that had to be the first issue to be addressed.

Sheila Baker: It took a change in the law—in the Code of Virginia. It was certainly in the Code of Virginia that you were required to send your child to public school until they were 16 or 18.

....

Interviewer: How many years did it take to get this change through?

Sheila Baker: I started reading and being aware of it in 1982, that was my first year and I worked down here at the office in Fredericksburg. My first year at the General Assembly was 1983.

And they were still fine tuning the home schooling laws the entire time I was there.

Interviewer: Did home schooling come about at all through integration or it was an independent move?

Sheila Baker: I think it was probably more independent. Integration made certain social changes in the composition of the school body and there may have been social changes parents didn’t like. I think it was more general laxity of discipline of children. The schools perhaps were not specifically expecting as much of children as parents thought they could attain rather than something specifically related to integration.

Interviewer: There was certainly a time lapse there.

Sheila Baker: Oh yes. One did not follow on the heels of the other.

Interviewer: But home schooling was an issue that really began to appear in your in box then about 1983?

Sheila Baker: Yes and you’d start having people come in about it. Then when legislation

started coming along we would have people from the district just sort of appear and want to be at the General Assembly while it was being discussed. They would drop by the office and leave their coats and papers and get their phone messages.

Interviewer: What size office did you have?

Sheila Baker: The General Assembly building has an office for each legislator and then there's space of some form for a legislative assistant for each member. If you happen to get a corner office you are a lot happier... The members are given an allotment for help and they may spend it the way they want. You can spend it on one or several part time people. One thing that was helpful during the sessions is you would have interns available from the University of Richmond. They would get academic credit and you could count on having some help which

was nice. They could file bills and run errands and help with school groups.

Interviewer: Oh school tours. I had forgotten about them.

Sheila Baker: Yes, you would have lots and lots of school tours. Some members who are from farther away do not have school tour groups, but Senator Chichester is close enough that we had lots and lots of school tours. They could leave school in the morning and get their students to Richmond and then leave Richmond in time to have the buses back to take them home at the end of the day.

So we had numerous school tours. Most of the schools in the Northern Neck probably did come.

Interviewer: What grades would come? Fifth, sixth?

Sheila Baker: Fifth grade would probably be the youngest. More likely would be high school civics classes. And there was a question of what to do with the groups. There were committee rooms with closed circuit tv and they could watch that. All the teachers would want to get their students in the gallery at least for a very short time. And always in the morning hour they recognize people in the gallery. You would get about two minutes for your students to be recognized and then they would have to leave because of other groups waiting to come into the gallery. We were cramped for space to say the least.

There was a lovely lady, Mrs. Troxell, who was in charge of Capitol building guides for many years and all of them were volunteers and they were very good about conducting the tours of the historic part of the building and the history. Of course getting the groups into the house and senate chambers is entirely at the discretion of the door keepers. There wasn't much space to begin with and it could very difficult at times getting your groups in.

Interviewer: Would you have to schedule with Mrs. Troxell?

Sheila Baker: Yes, but getting your people past the doorkeepers was often just catch as catch can.

And really it was quite a press. You would have lines and lines of children coming up the steps with their backs pressed to the wall. They would trying to juggle one group in and one group out. And of course the stairways of the Capitol are very small because it is a Jefferson-designed building and Jefferson did not like staircases. He didn't like the wasted space of large staircases and probably not the appearance of them either. Any Jefferson building that you see is going to have narrow stairs. And you have to get those kids up and down. At some point you have to consider handicap access. There is a very small elevator. Very slow. And then there for the question of rest rooms.

So it could all be difficult. It is very nice for them to have all the space they now have in the new visitors center.

Interviewer: And you had to handle these tours plus you had constituents dropping in.

Sheila Baker: You don't have that many dropping in to Richmond. People were good about calling ahead especially if it is a large group, so you would know they were coming. And groups would divide and some go to each office.... But you have a lot of citizen response during a legislative session. You really do.

Interviewer: And you would monitor bills?

Sheila Baker: You had to keep track of where the bills are, particularly your own legislators' bills.

Interviewer: What kind of system was there for monitoring legislation under consideration? Could you hear what was going on on the floor?

Sheila Baker: When I was there it came over the phone.

Your legislator expects you to be in the office. He in no way wants to look up and see you in the gallery. But we could hear it over the phone or there were some committee rooms you could go to and watch it over TV. I usually just listened over the phone and that was all I needed. You get what you call a calendar every day which was the bills and where they are and what's coming up. And that's the first thing I did every morning – was take the calendar and mark it for the senator. He would give me the one from the day before and I would know what he thought about each thing that was coming along. Or if he had a lot of mail about it, he would want to know that there were 35 letters regarding this bill or if there was a business or agency in the district particularly interested in this bill. He usually knew it anyway.

But he liked it marked on the calendar.

They leave for the session just a few minutes before noon and they are all coming out and crossing the sidewalk at the same time. And when he walked past my office he liked to have that senate calendar on the corner of the desk where he could reach in the door and pick it up. They call it a calendar but it is a daily calendar.

Interviewer: What about committee meetings?

Sheila Baker: That's why legislative sessions convene at noon. They have the committee meetings in the morning and then they convene at midday.

People don't understand in. They call in and would like to have lunch, but legislators don't eat lunch. They have committee meetings in the morning. The session starts at noon. Sometimes toward the end of the session, if there is a lot of business they will begin a session at 11 a.m. It's always sort of midday. And then there are committee meetings in the afternoon.

Interviewer: And they wouldn't necessarily stay in session very long.

Sheila Baker: They might not stay in session very long at all, but that doesn't mean they are not doing anything because a lot of legislation is divided up among subcommittees so you can have a subcommittee and a committee.

Interviewer: Now would aides monitor a meeting when the senator had more than one?

Sheila Baker: They find out what time legislation was coming up. They would just run from one meeting to the other. It can be pretty frenetic at times.

Interviewer: I can imagine. And to clarify you worked down in Richmond part of the time you worked for Senator Chichester.

Sheila Baker: Yes.

Interviewer: Did you say you tried to commute for a while?

Sheila Baker: I never tried to commute. I didn't start this legislative business until after our younger son had gone to college. I did not ever try to commute daily. I was able to go on Monday and for a short period of time I did try to come home one evening a week and go back early the next morning, but that was pretty wearing and so I usually stayed from Monday until Friday afternoon

Interviewer: And you did that for the 60 days?

Sheila Baker: And one person was granted some per diem so there was help with the expense.

Interviewer: Along with talking about staff, tell me about the ladies provided to do typing for the senators?

Sheila Baker: The Clerk of the Senate's office provided a secretary for every two senators. I don't know what it is now. So at the time I was doing this they usually engaged ladies who had just very recently retired from jobs with the state in Richmond and they had a good knowledge of state government and the lady who was our secretary for a number of years had taken early retirement from the Virginia Community College System and her husband had just retired from the highway department. That was pretty standard that you would have people who had recently retired and they knew people around Richmond and they didn't have a whole lot to learn about what office in what agency did what in the state. They would know how to spell the names of towns in dictation and things would sound familiar to them. It was very

helpful that these women would know as much about the state as they did.

Interviewer: And this person would also type for one other senator?

Sheila Baker: Each secretary had the typing and letters for two senators. They tried to keep them with senators from the same party. We had nine so there was one person who had one Republican and one Democrat and perhaps it took a little more tact and diplomacy. I sometimes had the feeling that the other secretaries felt sorry for her. But she handled it very well.

Interviewer: She would have to be aware of certain issues?

Sheila Baker: If nothing else you have two sets of people you had to keep straight. You would have people who would call from Republican headquarters and people calling from Democratic headquarters.

Interviewer: I understand.

Sheila Baker: She also was secretary for Edd Houck his first year in the Senate and that made a lot of sense because of the geographic area.

Interviewer: There are several other issues that we haven't talked about including transportation.

Sheila Baker: Well there was a great push for transportation during the Baliles administration. When I started Chuck Robb was governor. Baliles followed him and then Doug Wilder. I stopped just before George Allen was inaugurated. They were all Democratic governors even though during my years I was working for a Republican senator. Transportation was a major need during the Baliles years and there was a huge push for transportation and it was fairly successful. We needed it.

Interviewer: What were some of the other main issues.

Sheila Baker: Schools in one way or the other. And senators were always visited by every president of every college in the commonwealth every year. Always funding is huge issue. Even though the proportion of state funding in the colleges' budgets has gotten less and less each year, the colleges are always interested in state funding.

Interviewer: I have one I want to ask about: The Equal Rights Amendment.

Sheila Baker: Senator Chichester did not support that and he had already come out against that before I started to work from him. We did not hear a lot from ERA supporters since his position was clear.

(Mrs. Baker said later that another issue during the time period was handicapped access legislation. She said it was controversial because business people were well aware it was going to be expensive to provide adequate facilities and in some cases it was impossible. Handicapped access legislative proposals brought forth many handicapped people who lobbied hard for changes and legislators and aides became used to "heavy interest from all

quarters.”)

There were agencies and groups that you always heard from. One of them is the AARP. They always show up...

One thing that a lot of people may not realize is that different state agencies watch the legislation very carefully each year just because they themselves can be influenced by it a great deal. Most every county (and city) in Virginia will have someone there who very carefully watches every issue pertaining to public education. I was aware of the one from Stafford who used our office as his headquarters. He was a very fine person, Sam Perry, who monitored every single bill that pertained to education.

There are many many things that can influence public education: salaries, transportation, taxes, nutrition.

And most every county would have someone like that. There are just things they have to know.

Interviewer: A single legislator cannot monitor all that can he?

Sheila Baker: No. There's too many bills and too many fine points.

Interviewer: As I was reading about the sessions I was struck that there was so little about farming. It seems to me that it should be a farming district, but it isn't is it?

Sheila Baker: When we came to Fredericksburg why there were still a lot of farms in both Stafford and Spotsylvania. But by the 1980s we didn't hear too much about agricultural issues that I recollect.

Anything about tobacco did get a lot of interest. This was a time of the beginning of no smoking bans. When I first started going to the legislature there was section in the back of each of the big meeting rooms for smokers. It was just a given that there was smoking everywhere. Over the 11 years I was there it changed.

I was very surprised that the no smoking bills passed. Virginia is a tobacco state. I always found it surprising that they (no smoking in public facilities) passed as readily as they did. They had done away with the smoking stations in the General Assembly building too. Senator Chichester hated smoke and even if I hadn't stopped I wouldn't have smoked in the office. But a lot of people did. It was totally accepted. There was still a lot of contention over the no smoking issues but they prevailed more readily than I thought they would.

Also the lottery bill prevailed more readily than I thought it would because we would get tons of very adverse constituent mail against the lottery.

I would have expected it to take even longer than it did.

Interviewer: I think the general public does not always realize how long it takes to get anything through.

Sheila Baker: No, they don't. And legislators are loathe to do anything terribly radical. Incremental is more comfortable for legislators if they can approach it that way.

Interviewer: That's very true.

Sheila Baker: I don't think most people understand that there is a legislative language and complexity in writing bills. And when they ask their representative if you support something—are you for it or against it--their first answer will be “I haven't read the bill.” And that is not putting people off. They can't read all those bills and there are lots of pitfalls and land mines in bills.

And you don't want to express support for something and then be in a position of reneging. That's worse.

Even though they can't read every bill they depend on lobbyists and that is not all bad. A good lobbyist can tell you what's in a bill... because they are paid to know what's in there. And they can be helpful.

Until a legislator knows what is truly in a bill, he cannot tell you he is for it. They have to know what is in a bill and how it is written and what it provides for.

Interviewer: And bills can be hundreds of pages.

Sheila Baker: And there are requirements for material in the bill being pertinent but there are slipups there too. Things can get stuck in and added and a bill can get changed in committee.

A bill can come out a very different bill than it went in.

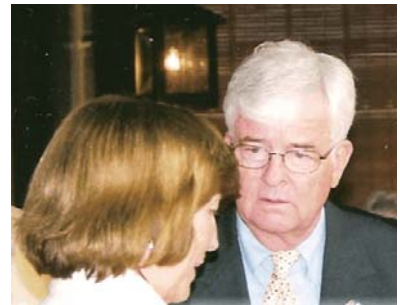
So you can find a legislator who will say generally that sounds like a good idea. But they are very hesitant to say they are specially for a bill until they know exactly what's there. And they could still not be for it because they may support it's basic intent but there could be provisions they don't like and until it is amended they have to dislike the whole bill.

I don't think the average person knows that and I am sure they don't care. It's an issue they are either for or against. But your legislator has to approach it from a much more precise point of view than the average citizen.

Interviewer: That's why so many of them are lawyers. That's the legal training.

Sheila Baker: Part of it is legal training. Part of it is that that is a profession that gives them some leeway in time. A lot of jobs and professions you can't take those chunks of time.

And they spend a lot of time in Richmond throughout the year. It is not just when the General Assembly is in session. There are committee meetings throughout the year and particularly as they move up in seniority and have chairmanships and there is a tremendous amount of time required in attending meetings with groups before the sessions. They all have their concerns and their needs and they want to identify those.... there is a lot more time required than it might



indicate.

Not being a morning person, I was appalled by the number of breakfast meetings. But Senator Chichester often would attend them. He's an early bird anyway.

And of course you work harder as the sessions comes closer. I used to dread that a little bit because it is the Christmas season. ...

... and you start looking forward to the session beginning about Halloween. It complicates the logistics of life a bit and it varied a lot among staffs. Some people would have the assistant go to things and report back. It varies widely from member to member.

Interviewer: I don't want us to get away from the General Assembly without touching on what happened to the Republicans as they increased in numbers. You said one time that when there were nine they sat in the back.

Sheila Baker: The General Assembly Building runs along Broad Street and faces Capitol Square and obviously the offices with the windows that look out on Capitol Square are obviously the nicer offices. Square foot for square foot there is no difference. But it is just the Capitol Square offices were the ones to have, so obviously the Republican offices looked out on Broad Street for a time. About midway of the time that I worked, Senator Chichester moved over to an office facing Capitol Square and I went from having a lovely corner aide's office where I could look down and see all the school buses arriving to one that was like a shoe box. I didn't even have a window.

Interviewer: You mean you did worse as he came up?

Sheila Baker: Yes, as he progressed to the nice Capitol Square office, I went to the shoe box office.

Interviewer: I was wondering if there was more activity in certain areas with the Republican party growing in dominance?

Sheila Baker: The sessions were guided more by what were the current issues on hand. The volume of bills just kept getting bigger and bigger each year. I don't think that was because it was Republican or Democratic. ...

The volume of bills that were written and handled just kept getting bigger and bigger each year.

One thing that makes a lot of small legislation is that the way Virginia works.

Virginia operates under the Dillon Rule which means that the state is the seat of authority and the local governments are granted authority by the state government. The local governments have to ask permission to do a great many things in Virginia that you would not have to in another state. Just for example when a historic attraction or a museum want to be tax exempt from local taxes, it was the state that granted that. The City of Fredericksburg could not grant Kenmore tax exempt status, that would come from the state.

Interviewer: And that would take a bill?

Sheila Baker: Yes and it took a lot of time just doing all these various places. That has only just been changed in recent years. While the structure was being removed from the local tax rolls – the local property tax– the authority to do that came from the State. All meals and lodging taxes–each local jurisdiction had to be granted the permission to have meals and lodging taxes–even though it was legal to do, you had to receive the authority from the state.

Interviewer: And what about the rate would that be set?

Sheila Baker: There would be a maximum limit as to what could be collected and you could elect to do less, although I think very few places ever set it lower. Just from the nature of Virginia state and local government, there is a lot of work and it takes a lot of time.

Interviewer: Would that kind of specific legislation take a hearing too?

Sheila Baker: Not necessarily.

Some of this legislation might just zip through committee, but you would never know. It might not.

Interviewer: But there are powers that localities do have?

Sheila Baker: There are certain powers that you just have and the constitution does spell out what constitutional officers you must have – like a sheriff . Then if they want a deputy, that's another issue and then you need to seek the funding too.

A lot of complexities between the workings of state and local government are peculiar to Virginia– just like the system of independent cities that is peculiar to Virginia.

And that can be time consuming too. You have the counties and then you add all these jurisdictions and these cities, so you have more inter-working, requests and hearings and more activities than you would have in other states.

Interviewer: I knew Virginia was complicated, but you've shown me complexities I never knew about. What about the regional planning authority? That must add a layer.

Sheila Baker: I think that has to come from the state. ...

But again that adds a layer of activity that is time consuming.

Interviewer: And turf battles where people can get upset, I would imagine.

Sheila Baker: Oh yes. You have people just calling to know where a piece of legislation stands and when it is going to be heard and if it is in a subcommittee when is there going to be action.

Interviewer: Now annexation was not an issue during your years?

Sheila Baker: Oh no. But that had been settled.

Interviewer: When you retired did you feel a great sense of relief?

Sheila Baker: No, I missed it. But I hadn't done it all my life so I didn't consider it retirement.

The time had just come when we had other needs. Senator Chichester was on the Senate Finance Committee while I still worked for him. He was going to become chairman and he needed a lot more help. And I had family concerns that made me think I shouldn't be spending quite so much time on it.

And then the technology was rapidly advancing and I was going to have to learn a lot about technological things and I felt I could do this, but someone else can do this better.

Interviewer: I doubt that. But I know what you mean, it can be daunting.

Sheila Baker: When I started out we had a computer person on either end of each floor of the General Assembly building.

And you still got these stacks of bills printed each day and that was what you wanted an intern for: To file these bills. The interns would know to file the bills each day when they showed up. All of that now is on line.

I took my grandson down to visit the session not too long ago, and I wanted to get a copy of a bill to take back to school with him and we had to go to the basement to get something on paper. It was all on line.

Interview Two in December of 2008

Interviewer: I wanted to begin today by asking if you were involved much in the campaign in which Senator Chichester ran for lieutenant governor?

Sheila Baker: John flew himself a lot.

Interviewer: You mean in his own plane?

Sheila Baker: Yes. It was sort of scary because you'd have to call and check and find out about where he could land the plane in little small places around the state. You felt very responsible for finding the right airport.

But after the campaign got underway he had a manager and I didn't really do anything much.

I think the manager's name was Dennis Peterson who did some Republican work all around the state. I think he was the official manager. The late Pina Swift (of Stafford) always did a great deal of Republican work.

Interviewer: Had she managed his other campaigns?

Sheila Baker: She had done a lot and there could have been others in earlier campaigns that I am not aware of.

Interviewer: You were not involved in the earlier days. Not part of the political scene?

Sheila Baker: No I did not come on the scene until after he had been in the Senate for a few years. It was a part time job and I was paid by the state. It was more office oriented.

Interviewer: Staff work.

Sheila Baker: Yes.

Interviewer: One thing I wanted to remember to ask about: what did people wear at the General Assembly at that time. Was it quite formal?

Sheila Baker: It was very conservative. You never saw a legislator without a tie. Men were in suits, sports coats, shirts and ties.

Interviewer: What about women? Now this would be in the 1980s.

Sheila Baker: You didn't see women in slacks at first but then they became more commonplace. You would see suits, dresses, nice sweaters and skirts. I would have been uncomfortable without a jacket. Conservative office dress I would say. It was pretty standard. You would rarely ever see anyone casually dressed except when you were dismantling the office or moving in.

Interviewer: And the staff was mostly women?

Sheila Baker: The legislative aides were very split. Probably more women, but there could be either. Someone who had worked with them or had helped in a recent campaign. A great variety.

Interviewer: I wanted also to ask about Chicken's. Tell me about the lunchroom.

Sheila Baker: It was a little small hole in the wall in the basement of the Capitol.

There was virtually no place to sit. They had tables to stand at.

The Senate and the House both go into session at noon and they would send the pages down to get their lunches and bring it to them on the floor. Those getting members' lunches have priority. There would be a lots of lobbyists there. Most the staff did not take a lunch but would get something and eat at their desks while monitoring the session or there would be a room where you could watch the session on closed circuit television. I usually just stayed at my desk and followed the session through the telephone.

Interviewer: I never did know: Did Chicken's serve chicken?

Sheila Baker: I don't think so particularly. It was soup and sandwiches and little tarts and chess pies. People loved the milk shakes. They made them from scratch.

Interviewer: Did she also make the pies too?

Sheila Baker: I don't know that she would have had the opportunity to make them. She may have at one time. But it was very close to home tasting food. It was very crowded, and popular. Of course there is a restaurant in the new area but not like Chicken's.

It was the only place there to eat frankly. If you didn't want to go out of the Capitol grounds there wasn't any place else. Everybody knew everybody in there. It was very well used.

Interviewer: And there were no chairs?

Sheila Baker: I don't remember ever seeing any, but of course the staff didn't go there that

much. Lunch was right smack in the middle of the work day.

Now when Lent fell in the time of the General Assembly people loved to go across the street to St. Paul's because they served Lenten lunches every day and it was wonderful food. People from all the Episcopal churches in the Richmond area worked on that . And we would try to get there some way. The lady who was our secretary, Claire Tucker, and I would try to finagle some way to get there on a Wednesday.

Interviewer: Why Wednesday?

Sheila Baker: We would try to go on Wednesday which was cheese souffle day at St. Paul's. It was very tasty and very popular. It was cheese souffle, baked tomato slice, and the dessert was cake and ice cream with either chocolate fudge or caramel sauce.

But other days were good too. There was baked chicken, baked spaghetti, dishes like that. But Wednesdays was very popular because it was cheese souffle day.

St. Paul's have now published a cookbook and they have take out meals and frozen meals. The money that is raised goes to hunger relief in the Richmond area. ...

Many churches send workers but St. Paul's has the kitchen required to prepare that much food.

Interviewer: It sounds like a large undertaking.

Sheila Baker: Oh yes. They seat many tables of eight or ten people.

They do two shifts. They have an early lunch and then there is a 30 minute Lenten service and there is a shift after the service. So you can choose.

You sit down at the table and they come and take your order. No standing in line and no buffet. The food is very good and you are surrounded by very happy people. And they get you in and out in about 30 minutes. And the food is good and very worthwhile. Lots of pleasant happy people are around you.

Interviewer: Are there any other places like that?

Sheila Baker: That's unique in downtown Richmond.

Of course Lent and the General Assembly don't always coincide. But I am sure that both the church and the General Assembly are happy when it does. But very rarely do you see a legislator there because they do go into session at noon. But the staff people would try to get over there if they could.

Interviewer: You actually were there in Richmond for several years?

Sheila Baker: For 11 years. Eleven sessions.

Interviewer: And you stayed down in Richmond overnight during the session.

Sheila Baker: Many people stayed at the Holiday Inn on Franklin street. It is no more. It has been turned into something else. A lot of legislators and staff people stayed there. They ran a shuttle back and forth. Of course if it was nice weather you could walk. It was exercise and a

breath of fresh air. But they did run shuttles and a lot of legislative connected people did stay there.

I think now people are more inclined to scratch around and try to find apartments or different things.

Some people stayed at the John Marshall but it had fallen on hard times even back then in the 1980s and 90s.

...

Interviewer: As I went over what we did last time, I realized that I had not followed up on the watermen and their interests.

Sheila Baker: The watermen are people who earn their living doing oystering when there was oystering and crabbing and fishing.

Interviewer: Does one individual do all three?

Sheila Baker: I am not real sure, but the Northern Neck was Senator Chichester's district. And you had counties dependent on that business. Anything that would limit or restrict catch or forbidding it certain months of the season—anything that influenced their income was a real concern to them. Even though it would seem short sighted that they would be so concerned about this because it would be a conservation measure for the industry. They would be very concerned at anything that affected their daily income and it was very important to them.

Interviewer: Did they have a group?

Sheila Baker: The word of mouth in that area is all it takes. There are marine science boards. And yes there are regulatory agencies but I don't know of any official group. But they all knew when anything that would affect their business was coming along.

Interviewer: You said something about an oyster disease .

Sheila Baker: Yes I don't know what the true scientific name was but it was called Dermo...but it some sort of illness. But the oyster business in that area is essentially gone. The disease hit in the 1970s and early '80s and it is an illness that just devastated the business. There was a lot of scientific effort to find out what caused it and what might stop it. There have been efforts over the years to introduce Asian oysters and all sorts of things that might flourish or counteract the loss, but there are always questions about that. Introduced species sometimes have side effects that you are completely unaware of. It's bad when any native species is being wiped out because it means something is causing it. You don't read about it now as much as you used to in the 80s or early 90s...

Interviewer: Did the crabs have an illness?

Sheila Baker: No the crabs weren't sick. It was just that the crabs were heavily harvested. And then they got the equipment that allowed them to dredge in the wintertime and get the crabs

from the lower regions. Something that they didn't use to be able to do and that was hard on the supply.

That was allowed that for a number of years and recently there is an effort to limit that. Now they are concerned that that is going to take place and will restrict their catch.

But it is a natural phenomenon — if you over tax and overwork you can end up wiping out the supply.

Interviewer: Are there many watermen?

Sheila Baker: Not as many as there used to be.

And it's hard work. Hard, cold work. And of course that area of Virginia is limited as to opportunities available so people tend to become watermen generation after generation. I am sure that is changing too.

Interviewer: I hope so. Maybe there are other things that will develop for them. It is certainly a charming area.

And there are fishing boats. Were there problems with the fishing boats?

Sheila Baker: I don't really know. We were concerned with what is called the fishery— it was the supply, gathering, and harvesting of marine wildlife. Fish, oysters, crabs, rock fish.

And of course there is a large industry down there—the Menhaden fishing around Reedville.

That's not an edible fish. That's ground up for commercial things. They had their own interests. Not like the individual watermen.

Interviewer: Well, you certainly had to learn a lot about fish in your job.

Sheila Baker: (Laughing)

Interviewer: I wanted to ask you about the Mary Washington House. (Interviewer volunteers at the Mary Washington House Museum shop and met Mrs. Baker through the shop.)

Sheila Baker: The Mary Washington House is one of four properties that the Association for the Preservation for Virginia Antiquities owns in Fredericksburg. The APVA has now combined with another preservation group and is calling itself Preservation Virginia which is not quite as much of a mouthful as the APVA. In Fredericksburg the APVA properties are the Mary Washington House, The Rising Sun Tavern, The Hugh Mercer Apothecary Shop, and the St. James Cottage.

I have belonged to the APVA ever since I have been in Fredericksburg.

Interviewer: You are an officer?

Sheila Baker: There are four vice presidents, one for each property, and my title is vice president for the Mary Washington House, and I am on the board but no way am I responsible for the day to day running of the Mary Washington House.

For one thing, the Mary Washington House is located next door to Gail Braxton our volunteer

director for many years. And she is always handy by and the Mary Washington House has our part time paid administrator working there in the office. I am on the board but in no way responsible for the day to day operation.

Interviewer: You have never put on a costume and gone over there to give a tour?

Sheila Baker: I work in the gift shop and the gift shop is staff ed by volunteers. It helps us avoid constant fund raisers. The gift shop was started in the late '70s by Bernie Kenneweg who still serves as shop treasurer. This year we reached one million dollars in gross sales (from the beginning through the fall of 2008). But that is gross not net, but certainly we have made several hundred thousand dollars of money for maintenance of the houses. Old houses are expensive and need lots of work. There is constant painting. The shutters are expensive, the doors, the hardware, the heating, air conditioning, the exterior and interior painting. All of it takes money.

Our recent major expense, a new roof for the Rising sun Tavern, was many thousand of dollars and we did have to have a fund raising drive for that, but the gift shop income has been able to pay for routine maintenance and a little bit beyond for the houses.

Interviewer: What would that run a year –about?

Sheila Baker: You just really do not know what you will run into from year to year...

Interviewer: Do you work every week?

Sheila Baker: Two or three times a month. There are probably 18 or 20 people who volunteer. Ann Harry is the shop director and does the buying and the scheduling and spends a great deal of time on the shop and Bernie Kenneweg still serves as shop treasurer and manages the investment and pays the shop expenses. The shop does pay a modest amount of rent to the Mary Washington House.

Interviewer: So you have never donned a costume and worked in the house?

Sheila Baker: I have a costume for Garden Week, but volunteers in the shop do not wear costumes. The docents who work in the house doing the tours wear costumes except in the dead of winter.

Interviewer: Do you still wear your costume for Garden Week?

Sheila Baker: It used to be that if you belonged to the Rappahannock Valley Garden Club you had a costume because all hostesses were expected to be in costume for Garden Week. We have got a little bit away from that. These days we just need more hostesses and some of the younger women prefer suits or black skirts and white blouses but you still see people in costumes.

Interviewer: Did you make yours?

Sheila Baker: No. Maryanne Cox here in Fredericksburg made mine and has made hundreds although there are certainly other people who make costumes.

Interviewer: I think I have come to the end of my notes. I have a note saying “Mrs. Troxell.”

Sheila Baker: Mrs. Troxell was the head hostess at the Virginia State Capitol and she had a group of ladies—volunteers—who took guests and school groups through the Capitol. That was all volunteer also. They had a desk in the Capitol rotunda and I think there is a desk in the wonderful new visitor center...

I have been there with a tour. Actually the man who is the Clerk of the Works for the entire Capitol project took our tour through. You enter from Bank Street and it is all underground. It was amazing how they put in a visitor center underground and did so without disturbing Capitol Square.

Interviewer: I enjoyed visiting there and I look forward to seeing the new building which I was looking at last night on the internet.

The interviewer and Mrs. Baker chat on for a very few minutes about the visitor center at the



Capitol building and other matters and conclude the interview.

Front row, from left, Ellen Lawrence Baker, Nicholas Bryce Baker, 8, Leland Elizabeth Baker, 11, Thomas Witt Baker Jr., 13. Back row, from left, Taylor Michael Baker, 18, William Taylor Baker, Leland L. Baker Jr., Sheila Eddy Baker, Dianne Rosser Baker, and Thomas Witt Baker.

