

AMERICA WORKS PODCAST

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER

SEASON 03: EPISODE 2: Roberta Washington. Architect. New York, New York.

ANNOUNCER: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

THEME MUSIC: "Pay Day" played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

NANCY GROCE (Host): Welcome to *America Works*, excerpts from interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library's American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This is AFC staff folklorist Nancy Groce and this *America Works* episode features excerpts from a longer interview with the distinguished architect Roberta Washington, who is the principal (or head) of her own firm, Roberta Washington Architects, in New York City.

Noted for her innovative work on health care facilities, housing projects, and educational structures, Washington has served as president of the National Organization of Minority Architects and chairperson of the New York State Board of Architects. Among many other honors, in 2006, she was elected to the prestigious American Institute of Architects to their College of Fellows. Originally from Greensboro, North Carolina and a graduate of Howard University, Washington was interviewed by oral historian and architect Sarah Filkins as part of her American Folklife Center's Archie Green Fellowship to document women architects throughout the United States.

During their in-depth interview, Washington traces her career, her involvement in community planning and network building, and the challenges she faced as a woman--particularly as an African American woman--in a field that, especially when she started, was overwhelming White and male. She begins this episode by recalling how as part a junior high school assignment to interview "someone about their job" her life was changed when she chanced upon a Black professor of architecture, who just happened to be renting her neighbor's home.

INTERVIEW

Roberta Washington: I told him I was interested in art and he asked me why I was interested in art. And I said, because I thought with art you could create beautiful pictures, beautiful

scenes—that it was something people could enjoy and I enjoyed doing it and I liked creating. And he said, “Well, then you definitely should be doing architecture because if you were doing architecture not only would you create something beautiful, something that people could enjoy, but also something that could be of use to people. And so I was sold.

Sarah Filkins: Well, what did your Mom think when you told her you wanted to be an architect?

Roberta Washington: My mother backed me and my other siblings in whatever it was we said we wanted to become because she had spent most of her life doing day work, which is working in White folks’s kitchens and homes as a maid. And she had had other aspirations and hadn’t been able to achieve them, and so she was especially concerned that her daughters should not follow her, in her footsteps, and so whatever we were interested in she supported us like a hundred percent.

Sarah Filkins: So you got into Howard University?

Roberta Washington: Yes. I loved design because that was what attracted me to the profession. So, I loved to design, but then we learned all of the other things you had to know to put it together.

And so the first year was really rough just because I came from a high school where girls did not take drafting courses. And so I felt like I was starting from behind on day one and so the first year was rough, but then I caught up. And the more I tried and as time passed the more I felt like, yes this is for me! And I can do this, this is something I can manage and understand.

I went to Detroit and I worked on that big huge hospital project. But it was like my first job in an architect’s office and I suppose I did what you do if it was your first job in an architect’s office: I did tons of bathroom designs and I did designs here and there, on every floor, and I was getting really very fed up with it. And it was a huge firm. I think it was like 500 people in one building or something.

But in that 500 or how many ever, there were only like maybe five or six or seven Black folks, but one was an associate--was a director, not a director, an associate or something, and anyway I went to him and complained that this isn’t what I came to Detroit to do. I didn’t come to this firm to do this and I know more and I should be allowed to do more and I was just going crazy about it and just going off at the mouth and he just sort of said, “Well, I don’t see why you think anybody should let you do any more. You’ve only been out of school, like, so many months. Why would anybody give you any major design stuff?”

And then he said, “If you really wanted to improve your chances you’d have to improve your knowledge.” And I was saying, “Well how can I do that? How can I learn something like that?” And he said, “Columbia University has a school of hospital design.” And it was a one year program and it was a Master in Science degree program and so that sounded great. So that’s how I ended up at Columbia in graduate school.

Sarah Filkins: Could you also talk about the African Burial Ground Interpretive Center?

Roberta Washington: So there’s a story behind the story, really. I can’t remember the year that the bones were first discovered, but I know from that point on I wanted to do that project, but of course that’s nothing because I’m sure lots of people, many architects wanted to do their project. This was the Park Service project in New York and they had several sort of false starts in terms of how to give the project out.

And I’m thinking that this is like the smallest job in the world. It’s like ten-thousand square feet. Now, if a small Black firm can’t do ten-thousand square feet then they should be shot, why are they here? What is the point? So how is that?

And so I did a proposal. I spent like a zillion hours and lots of manpower to do a proposal that could convince them that I could do a ten-thousand square foot building. Never mind that I had already done buildings that were fifty-thousand square feet. I could do a ten-thousand square foot building. And so we got it!

Yes, and so it was like a—it was an incredible-- for me it was a little tiny job and one of the smallest I ever had, but it was just like really important to be a part of something that had that kind of significance to African Americans, but also to the City and to say something to people who were interested in the history of the City that they couldn’t find anywhere else. And so there it is, all wrapped up in one building.

I didn’t really start out trying to have a firm. If it had been possible to be recognized within somebody else’s firm I would have done that, but I think that might be possible today. And it may only be possible because also just in terms of who the client is--and all over the country Black folks and Black communities and Black organizations have become major clients.

Sarah Filkins: What do you see as your greatest accomplishment?

Roberta Washington: I think surviving it all and living to tell about it!

END OF INTERVIEW

THEME MUSIC: “Pay Day,” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

NANCY GROCE (Host): You've been listening to Roberta Washington, head of Roberta Washington Architects in New York City. She was interviewed for the American Folklife Center by oral historian and architect Sarah Filkins as part of Filkins' Archie Green Fellowship to document "Women Architects."

To hear Filkins' complete interview with Roberta Washington as well as interviews with other prominent women architects and hundreds of other contemporary American workers, please visit the Library's Occupational Folklife Project at www.loc.gov/folklife -- or just search online for the Occupation Folklife Project.

This is staff folklorist Nancy Groce. On behalf of the American Folklife Center, and with a special thanks to AFC intern Camille Acosta for her help with this episode, thank you for listening to *America Works*.

ANNOUNCER: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov.