

Fairlington Historical Society Interview Transcript

Interviewee: John Sinks

Interviewer: Lisa Sabol

Date: May 30, 2026

Lisa Sabol: Okay, so let me ask your name.

John Sinks: I am John Sinks.

Lisa Sabol: And today is May 30th, 2026. My name is Lisa Sabol, I'm with the Fairlington Historical Society. John, may I ask you your age on September 11th, 2001?

John Sinks: Well, in 2001, I've gotta subtract 25 years. I would have been... Mm, this is awkward. If you hadn't asked me my... I'm 79 now. So, 79 minus 25.

Lisa Sabol: 54. Yes. Okay. And how long have you lived in Fairlington?

John Sinks: I've lived in Fairlington for 55 years. I moved to South 29th Street when all of Fairlington was rental in 1971. They started offering units in Fairlington Commons for sale and we had right of second refusal. People who lived in what became the Commons had right of first refusal. People who lived elsewhere in Fairlington had second right. So, we exercised our second right and made a down payment on a Georgetown. In 1973, we moved to South Wakefield Street in the Commons. In 1975, I had received a couple of promotions and could afford a larger unit, which we wanted so we could have a family, and we purchased a Clarendon on South 34th Street in 1975. We have lived in that unit from 1975 until present.

Lisa Sabol: Okay. So you're married and you have children?

John Sinks: Yes

Lisa Sabol: And how many children do you have?

John Sinks: Two children

Okay. And were they born or were they living with you during September 11th, 2001, or had they left?

John Sinks: Yes

Lisa Sabol: Okay. So where were you on September 11th? Where were you, in Fairlington or somewhere else?

John Sinks: I was at work at I believe it was 2 North Capital Street. I worked for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. We were in the city Post Office Building, the former Post Office Building across from Union Station.

Lisa Sabol: Okay. Okay, so you were close to the Capitol then?

John Sinks: Yes. As a matter of fact, I had a window office and could see the Capitol from my window.

Lisa Sabol: Oh wow. Nice. Okay. So how did you find out about the September 11th attacks?

John Sinks: I think somebody heard on the radio and the word spread very, very quickly by word of mouth. We turned on a radio so we could hear updates. Everyone was very concerned. We crowded around the radio. And early release was announced close to noon. But since I took the bus and subway and transferred at the Pentagon, it was obvious I wasn't going to get home in my normal way. So, I hitched a ride with my boss's carpool, which went out to Reston. I got out of the car at Route 123 and Great Falls Street in McLean and walked to my mother's house, which was near Great Falls and Pimmit Run.

Lisa Sabol: Okay. So when you first heard about the attacks, did you just hear about New York? Had you heard yet about the Pentagon? Or like, how did you learn?

John Sinks: I think we heard about New York before we heard about the Pentagon.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah. So when you left at noon, what did you know? That the Pentagon had been hit?

John Sinks: Yes, we knew that the Pentagon had been hit. We learned that the Pentagon had been hit very quickly. I called my wife, who was still at home, and told her not to go to work. She worked at Pentagon City for Macy's, and I figured she had no business going to work.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah. Because I remember on that day I was out in Reston, but I remember hearing a lot of rumors about the different buildings in D.C. being hit once the Pentagon was hit. I remember hearing rumors about the Capitol and the White House and buildings in Rosslyn. Did you, given that you were so close to the Capitol, did you have any fear or concern about your safety, knowing the Capitol was a target?

John Sinks: Well, we knew that... I could see that it hadn't been hit. And there were no radio reports of other hits or strikes. But of course, we all wondered what's going to get hit next.

Lisa Sabol: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Okay. So it sounds like you got off in McLean and went to your mother's house?

John Sinks: Yeah, it was over a mile walk. It was a warm day, so I worked up a sweat on the walk to my mother's house. My wife then drove to McLean and picked me up from there.

Lisa Sabol: Was she able to reach McLean pretty easily, or was she stuck in traffic? Do you know if she was stuck in traffic?

John Sinks: There was no real traffic problems, either way.

Lisa Sabol: And where were your children at this point?

John Sinks: I don't remember. I would presume that they were at home or in school.

Lisa Sabol: Okay. So they were school-aged children at that time?

John Sinks: Yeah, well, Louise was... Actually, Louise was probably away in college at that point in time, and James would have been at home.

Lisa Sabol: How long did you end up staying at your mom's? You said your wife picked you up and then you, I guess, you drove back to Fairlington?

John Sinks: Several hours

Lisa Sabol: Okay. And when you came back to Fairlington, what did you notice? Was there anything, you know, were you able to see what was going on at the Pentagon from here, or like, no? Okay.

John Sinks: Absolutely not, no visual contact no smells, no sounds.

John Sinks: There might have been sirens. Now, days later, I drove and I saw the side that had been hit, but it was some days before I could see that.

Lisa Sabol: When you got home were there people out or just everyone kind of at home sort of trying to watch the news, or did you talk to anyone?

John Sinks: Everyone was pretty much at home. I didn't see people out and we didn't really walk around.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah. So you just were at home then? And were you just watching the news and keeping updated on what's going on?

John Sinks: Correct.

Lisa Sabol: What in terms of like the impact, short-term, I mean, how did things change for you, or did they change for you after September 11th?

John Sinks: Well, in the immediate short term, I wasn't able to take a bus to the Pentagon and transfer. They did change the bus routes. In terms of another impact, before September 11th, BLS employees had to go through turnstiles that would read an electronic identity card. And of course, guards were watching to make sure that the lights came on and the turnstiles turned on and so on. Now, there were some congressional employees—I believe it was the Architect of Senate or Architect of the Capitol—up on the seventh floor. And they had insisted consistently that those arrangements were not suitable for them. They would flash an ID and get in. Now, the guards would look at the ID, but frankly, flashing an ID is not as secure as an electronic device going through a turnstile when there is an attendant keeping an eye on things in addition.

Lisa Sabol: Right.

John Sinks: Once 9/11 happened, all of their concerns about the BLS arrangements went away, and they got electronic IDs and they went through the turnstile too. So, that was rather amusing to us, but we were pleased. We thought it was a better arrangement for everybody in the building.

Lisa Sabol: So since you worked near the Capital what was different there? Were things different in terms of security?

John Sinks: I have no idea of what was going on with Capitol security. You know, I could see the Capitol building from the window of my office, but I did not have occasion to go into the Capitol. I didn't have occasion to go by the Capitol, except on rare occasions when I would go to the Library of Congress and would walk by it. But I wouldn't enter the Capitol; I didn't have business there.

Lisa Sabol: Okay, So you didn't notice anything, any kind of spillover, any impacts where your office was.

John Sinks: No, I did not see it personally. But I believe throughout the government there was tighter security even if the arrangements were the same. The guards were certainly more attentive. And one other change: automobiles entering our building were subsequently subjected to popping the trunk, and a mirror was run underneath each side of the car.

Lisa Sabol: Okay. So just increased security all around, even just entering the building.

John Sinks: Yeah, there was tighter security, it was more than just an id.

Lisa Sabol: When you first heard about the attacks, what was your first reaction or, you know, feelings?

John Sinks: Well, I suppose it was, "Oh my heavens, what on earth has happened and why?"

Lisa Sabol: Yeah. As time went on, if you think of more the medium-term and the longer-term, what do you think the impact has been, whether it's locally or even just the D.C. region, nationally, or globally? What has changed and what do you think the impact of the September 11th attacks are?

John Sinks: Well, one impact was that the United States certainly became more aggressive with respect to foreign threats.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah. Okay. Are there other impacts that you can think of, of things that have changed?

John Sinks: I think we're seeing the impact with respect to immigration now, many years later. And I think that the current Mideast hostilities reflect some impact also.

Lisa Sabol: How so?

John Sinks: We're at war, despite it being called something other than a war by some people.

Lisa Sabol: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, yeah. And you feel that that's a lingering impact? Do you feel that that is a lingering impact of—

John Sinks: Yeah, that's a lingering impact. President Obama worked very hard to make arrangements for nuclear stockpiles to be put under Russia's control even though it was owned by Iran. And he arranged for inspections, which were happening. Now, something a lot of people have forgotten is that Iraq, Saddam Hussein was trying to make the world believe that he had weapons of mass destruction. It turned out that he didn't, and now people are saying that Bush lied that he did. Well, they're forgetting that there was a real effort back then by Saddam Hussein to make the world believe that he had 'em. But we did have a treaty in place with Iran to limit their ability to get weapons of mass destruction. They had a fatwa that they would not develop an atomic bomb. And that arrangement was abolished at the beginning of the past presidential term.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah.

John Sinks: And we'll be lucky if we get a similar arrangement again from what I can see. It remains to be seen.

Lisa Sabol: Is there anything else that you would like to talk about in terms of September 11th, your experiences at the time, or thoughts about it, looking back 25 years—which is hard to believe, but 25 years later? Anything else that you'd like to reflect on?

John Sinks: Well, I'll make a couple more comments. Everyone in the neighborhood was concerned. None of our neighbors lost family members. I did have a close friend who lost a brother, not at September 11th, but in the Scotland airplane bombing.

Lisa Sabol: Lockerbie, is that what you're talking about?

John Sinks: Yeah,

Lisa Sabol: okay.

John Sinks: The stories that were exchanged were mostly about commutes to get home that day. There was a special event, I believe it was at the firehouse, to honor the firefighters and police who helped in the response.

Lisa Sabol: Okay, the firehouse here in Fairlington?

John Sinks: Yeah, the firehouse in Fairlington. And we were unable to attend because more than 30 days before, in accord with the bylaws of Fairlington Commons, we had scheduled our annual meeting. The notices had been mailed. Under the bylaws, we had a limited time within which we had to hold the meeting, and we went ahead and held the meeting. It was not particularly well-attended, but our meetings generally weren't during that era.**Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**

Lisa Sabol: There's certain minimum requirements, as we all know, under associations.

John Sinks: The quorum is now met, I believe, in all the communities by proxies. Now, back in the early days of the Commons, in 1973, '74, '75, there was no problem getting a quorum whatsoever. Everybody was very concerned, and that was another generation. In the Commons, a tremendous number or percentage of our residents were of the World War II generation, and they were very civic-minded, very community-oriented, and we were all very intrigued and concerned about this new thing, the condominium association, and we piled out for the early meetings. Now I'm venturing away from September 11th, my apologies.

Lisa Sabol: No worries. No, it's interesting to talk to someone who's been in Fairlington for... I think you might be the longest that I've met, 'cause most people I've met that have been in here a long time, you know, from the time of ownership, original owners, and you predate that as you were a renter. So...

John Sinks: Yeah. And my wife and I are among the few original owners still left in the Commons. There are very few of us left.

Lisa Sabol: How do you think Fairlington has changed from the '70s through 2001, through 2026?

John Sinks: Well, I believe that fewer of the World War II generation moved into the other associations because I think a lot of those who moved into the Commons were renting in Fairlington at the time. And there was really sort of a sharp split between the World War II generation and the 20-somethings, like my wife and me, in the Commons. And we were starting families. As the World War II generation moved out, more younger people moved in and there were lots of kids in the Commons. And then we aged.

Lisa Sabol: 70s-80s?

John Sinks: The kids aged, went away to college, moved away from home, and there were a heck of a lot more in middle-age who didn't have kids at home. And now we've seen a cycle back; there are a lot more people with kids. I think that they tended to be older than we were, that they've started their families a little older.

Lisa Sabol: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

John Sinks: But housing is more expensive these days relative to what we paid. You know, we bought dirt cheap. And when we bought in '75, we looked around... well, we looked around when we put our money down and we saw that we could get more for the dollar per square foot than we could elsewhere. And I think to some extent that was because condominiums were new and they couldn't charge what they can charge today. In '75, we looked around also and we looked pretty far away—we looked out at Reston and so on—and we saw that we still could purchase more square feet for the dollar in Fairlington. And we bought a larger unit in the Commons.

Lisa Sabol: Mm-hmm.

John Sinks: So, that has been a change.

Lisa Sabol: Big change, yeah. I wanted to ask you about... you were talking about the World War II generation being more civic-minded. Can you think of other examples or things where that played out in Fairlington?

John Sinks: Yeah, back in the rental days and early on in the days of our Commons, there was a Fairlington Women's Club. I don't think there is anymore. And I suspect that women's clubs are on the way down, that there isn't as much gender-segregated sensitivity now as there was back then. And my wife was even president of the Fairlington Women's Club for a year, so that would be another difference that I've seen. My mother was president of the women's club in McLean for some years. I don't know whether the women's club in McLean is still flourishing or not.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah. Yeah. I know we have the Fairlington Moms here, but that's really for mothers of toddlers versus... yeah..

John Sinks: Yeah. Yeah. Now, that is a separate common interest type thing. My kids went to Valley Day preschool, which attracted a lot of people in the Commons. That was where we met...

Lisa Sabol: Was that close by?

John Sinks: Well, yeah, that was just across Quaker Lane. And that's where we met Libby Garvey. She had a kid there in the same class as ours. And the mothers volunteered. Fathers would volunteer, but most of the fathers back then had jobs that kept them away from home during pre-school hours.

Lisa Sabol: So how you found people met each other was through pre-school or schools. I mean, yeah. And do you still keep in touch with neighbors that you've known over the years in Fairlington?

John Sinks: There aren't that many left. And the one that I think of that I still have occasional communication with mostly communicates with me because I served a long time on the board of the Commons, about 24 years.

Lisa Sabol: Okay

John Sinks: But nobody on our court... well, I take it back. There's one woman who was living with her mother who is still on our court, but I communicate with her because she's on our court. But off of our court, it's a different matter. And offhand, I can think of only one other original owner. The last one I can think of moved off of Utah Street about 4 or 5 years ago. We had neighbors who lived on the court behind us that moved maybe 10 years ago.

Lisa Sabol: I see. So just a lot of change. At this point, people have moved on. Yeah.

John Sinks: Yeah. And even if they're still alive, they've moved on.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to share about whether it's September 11th or just your experiences in Fairlington, being one of probably the longest-term residents of Fairlington, at least that I've met?

John Sinks: Not offhand. I can tell you some stories about some of our old neighbors that maybe the recorder had better not be on for.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah, yeah, yeah, okay. Well, thank you very much for your time and for being open to share your experiences.

John Sinks: Okay, If you have further questions, let me know.

Lisa Sabol: Okay. Thank you.

John Sinks: Okay.