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I, Ethel M. Potts, have read the above and, in view of the historical value of this information, agree to the recording of my voice and my stories. I grant the University of Baltimore the full use of this information in all media known and unknown. I grant and assign all my rights pertaining to this information to the University of Baltimore.

Signed: [Signature]

Name (print) Ethel M. Potts
Address 5601 South Blvd. Rd.
          Baltimore, MD 21209

Telephone (410) 466-1252
Date 11/2/97 Interviewer [Signature]
**INFORMATION SHEET**

**INTERVIEWER:** Josephine Proctorius-Beneke  
**PROJECT:** East Baltimore Oral History  
**DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW:** 1997.11.18, 1997.12.19  
**PLACE(S) OF INTERVIEW:** Little Potts Furniture, 2112 E. Monument St.

**INFORMANT’S BIOGRAPHICAL DATA**

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<tr>
<th>NAME:</th>
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<tr>
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**MEMBERSHIPS:**  
(FOR POLITICAL, PROFESSIONAL, SOCIAL, HOBBY, ETC.)  
- Furniture Retail Association  
- Baltimore Retail Merchant Association  
- Monument Parking Association

**SCHOOLING AND/OR OTHER TRAINING:**  
(ONLY NAME, INSTITUTION, DEGREE)  
- Johns Hopkins University, BA – 1939  
- University of Baltimore, MBA – 1986
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<th>COUNTER NUMBER</th>
<th>TRANSCRIPT PAGE</th>
<th>TOPIC(S):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1–A  | 01-05          |                 | Introduction of interviewee  
Date and place of birth,  
origin of Grandparents,  
education and occupation of Parents |
| 1–A  | 06-10          |                 | Founding of Little Potts by Father in 1911  
Interviewee as Successor,  
deliveries on bicycle,  
allocation of space |
| 1–A  | 11-15          |                 | Residence of Grandparents, Parents, interviewee;  
Married in 1949, Four Daughters |
| 1–A  | 16-20          |                 | Community Responsibility,  
Activity in Business Community,  
pro-bono Secretary of the Merchant Association,  
Monument Parking Assn. part of Merchants Assn.  
Retail Furniture Assn. and Retail Merchants Assn. |
| 1–A  | 21-25          |                 | Sales Collection, Retail Credit, Installment Credit;  
Range of Goods, 25 different classes of merchandise, furniture, appliances, entertainment goods, anything to do with the home;  
Limited Transportation for Salesman, Samples. |
| 1–A  | 26-30          |                 | Credit Furniture business both a Merchandising and Finance business;  
Change in Price and Wage levels;  
Description of Monument St. as it was. |
| 1–A  | 31-35          |                 | Change in community’s composition, blacks move into predominantly white area;  
Automobiles, whites shop in Highlandtown, blacks on Monument St. |
| 1–A  | 36-40          |                 | Credit – checks records of accounts opened in 1960 and 1963 |
| 1–A  | 41-45          |                 | Interviewee’s work in store from early age,  
Telephone Operator at 8, Elevator Operator at 10, delivery runs;  
Demise of many marginally profitable businesses due to advent of Universal Credit;  
Viability of Retail Credit, advantage of repeat business vs. new business, loyalty no longer needed |
1–B 01-05 Extension of Credit, Circumstances of Debtors
1–B 06-10 Rental Properties, Warehousing vs. Residential
1–B 11-15 Clientele and where they come from: Furniture Rental as successor to Credit Furniture business.
1–B 21-25 Type of Furniture, type of clientele, shade of blue-collar and lost job categories, Decision to liquidate the business and how it was reached; Changing demographics of City and State.
1–B 26-30 Availability of Labor during World War II, claimed for Armed Forces and Defense Plants, women in both, small work force available to retail businesses.
1–B 31-35 Influx of African-American Women from South, Whites from Appalachia, Native-Americans; Many Women returned to their homes after the War or after many years; In general, more women in clerical jobs, fine production work and lighter industry.
1–B 36-40 Personnel Relations in Little Potts, promotion from within, union contracts, strikes
1–B 41-45 East Baltimore Residents had Summer Homes
2–A 01-05 East Baltimore Neighborhood (no childhood experience in East Baltimore Synagogue)
2–A 06-10 Civic Responsibility, example set by Father, moral obligation to participate in rejuvenating inner city.
2–A 11-15 Interviewee’s opinion on Project.
2–A 16-20 Thank you.
INTERVIEW - MR. EFREM POTTS

Jo: Mr. Potts, you have spoken to our class on various occasions about the business your family held on East Monument Street for nigh on one hundred years. I would like to ask you some questions pertaining to your personal background as well as to the business that has been such a feature of the neighborhood of East Baltimore. Would you please start by stating your name and birthdate, as well as the place where you were born?

Mr. Potts: My name is Efrem Potts, ah... I was in Baltimore October 11, 1927.

Jo: How would you describe your ethnic background?

Mr. Potts: My ethnic background is... is Jewish... ah... with a mostly... ah East European heritage. A grandfather was born in 1836 and died in 1901. He came to America in 1851. His port of entry was Savannah, Georgia. He lived in Charleston, South Carolina... ah... during his first years in American. Then I believe, have never been able to verify this, but because he didn’t want to fight for either the South or the North, he moved to Hamilton, Ontario. Then later in the 1860’s moved to Cleveland, Ohio, and moved to Baltimore in the late 1870’s... ah... spending the remainder of his life in Baltimore. He was a secretary by profession. This was before the days of women secretaries and before the days of typewriters... ah... and he would have been... from the type of employer he had... he would have been an executive director of a community organization in today’s language. This grandfather had nothing to do with the retail furniture business. The grandfather that was the first merchandiser in the family... ah... came to America from Lithuania in 1881. His port of entry was Baltimore. Baltimore was an important port of entry from Europe then. It was the United States terminus of the Hamburg American Line. He did not settle in Baltimore immediately but went to Pennsylvania... ah... near Gettysburg and maintained... ah... I believe maintained a small store... ah... but served as a peddler visiting the farms... ah... in the surrounding territory. And in 1883 my father was born in a town by the name of Linksville, Pennsylvania. They moved from Pennsylvania back to Baltimore. ah... when my father was between four and five years old and... ah... moved to Monument Street... when my father was a teenager... ah... occupying the storefront building at 2110
East Monument Street which is now Chow Mein [?] carry-out, as a storefront dwelling. . ah. . .beginning in February 1898. . ah. . .Since then the family has had a continuous presence in the East Monument Street business district. Originally my grandfather operated a second-hand furniture store at that location. . ah. . .later in. . ah. . .in 1909, 1910, 1911 my mother. . ah. . .operated a millinery shop at that location. One of he things that my. . ah. . .maternal grandfather. . ah. . .believed in is that each of his children should have a trade. . ah. . One son was trained as a sign painter, another one was trained. . ah. . as a leather worker and was in the luggage business for nine years. A daughter was trained as a seamstress. Another daughter was trained as a schoolteacher and my mother was trained as a milliner. . ah. . .So during the early years of marriage, when my father was teaching chemistry and German at the Pennsylvania State School of Forestry at Mont Alto, Pennsylvania. . ah. . .which is now part of the University of Pennsylvania. My mother was living in Baltimore running a millinery store in a building that her in-laws lived in. . ah. . .The family furniture business. Little Potts got founded in 1911. My father, whose original intention was not to make a career of retail – his original intention was to accumulate fifty thousand dollars that he could invest in what was then a very sound investment, ground rent ‘cause the yield was six percent return and between the interest, the investment income, and what he could earn as a research chemist, which was really his first desire, he would have enough to support his family the way he felt they needed to be supported. ah. . .My brother, who was thirteen years my elder, grew up during a period when my father thought the furniture business was only temporary and my brother has a Ph.D. in biochemistry and an MD and was a research ophthalmologist. My father was in the furniture business at least twenty five years before he realized that he was going to be in the furniture business for the rest or his life. . ah. . .I grew up pretty much after that realization and it was natural for me to be the successor in the family furniture retail business. The business was founded without a store front in the 2100 block of Monument Street on the South side on the street and my father originally made deliveries of rolled up mattresses — there were no inner spring mattresses in those days — or of linoleum rugs by bi-cycle and his first employee was a part time young man in
the neighborhood who was also able to make deliveries of similar kinds of goods on bi-
cycle. . .ah. . .The first storefront was at the Northwest corner of Monument and Collington\{Carleton\} Avenue which was occupied I believe about 1912 or ‘13. Then the building that was built as the Little Potts furniture store on the Northeast corner of Monument and Duncan at 2112/2114 East Monument was built in 1919 and occupied in 1920. Originally only the first floor and the second floor were used for furniture display. The basement and the third floor were used for warehouse kinds of storage. . .ah. . .and it was not until 1931 that those two floors were completed and furnished for display. But from 1931 until 1981 when the furniture business was liquidated, the entire building except for some space used for offices was used for furniture display. . .ah. . {laugh} . .I don’t know how much more you want on that subject.

Jo: Well, did. . .ah. . .did your family live on the premises at that time? I know you don’t live here now.

Mr. Potts: The family. . .ah. . .my parents bought a home at 511 North Kenwood Avenue. . .ah. . .which is about I guess six blocks East and two blocks South from East Monument. where we are, about the time that the furniture business was. . .ah. . .established so that they never lived on the premises of the furniture business. My grandparents continued to live at 2110 East Monument Street until my grandmother died in 1917 and then my grandfather, who was unable to maintain the household himself, moved into the Hebrew Home for the Aged ah at Monument Street and Rutland Avenue . .ah. . .which in later years became part of Sinai Hospital as. . .ah. . .far as location is concerned and then the the Hebrew Home for the Aged got moved to Levindale which is where it continues to exist. . .ah. . .My grandfather died in 1920 so he was there for like three and a half years at Monument and Rutland.

Jo: Other than yourself, have any other family members been involved?
Mr. Potts: Over the years...there have been a number of nephews of my father’s that were employees of the business...I am the only direct descendent of my generation...who was in the business, but during the time that I was the principal, there were a number of my...children and nephews and nieces that...worked...in the business after school, during the summer...Some of them with positions of...continuity...of year round importance. In fact at the time that the business was liquidating...my daughter...was the principal merchandise buyer.

Jo: Ah...you spoke of your children...when were you married, how many children did you have?

Mr. Potts: We were married in November 1949...and there were four children. The eldest is was born in 1952, the youngest in 1964...all four daughters.

Jo: Nice...What has been your business relationship with the other business on the street?

Mr. Potts: We have always had a sense of community responsibility so that we always were involved in a merchant association...if one was active...I don’t know that...any member of the family served as president of that association...however, we were also involved in the Furniture Retail Association which was quite active during the forties and fifties and my father was president of that for a year or two. It...By the time I became principal of...it had ceased to be of major value. I served on the board of the Retail Merchant Association which was the overall retail association for Baltimore City, but it was dominated by the traditional department stores...the...as far as Monument Street is concerned. I was at one time head of a Monument Parking Association...that was responsible for the creation of off-street parking facilities for both merchants and customers...that came under the Merchant Association...Since I have not been a retailer...I have been active probably for close to ten years now in the Merchants Association as pro bono Secretary doing the most of the paperwork and because I did not have a store to mind were able to attend...the meetings on behalf of the Association...that occur during the day, that occur at times when the other people had to be in their store...
ah. . .It is interesting. In the fifties, forties and fifties. I guess six-ties also, there were a number of family owned, family operated stores, in the Monument Street business district that were large enough so that the principal. . .ah. . .wasn’t minding the store so that there were many more people in my position or in my father’s position who were able to be involved in business community activities. . .ah. . .Today the mix of merchants is such that. . .ah. . .there are no. . .ah. . .large operators other than chains where the Monument Street person. . .ah really is a store manager and nothing beyond a store manager. Or it is a family owned operation where the owner is also the operator and the customer contact person. so that the ability to be flexible enough to tend to association business is less than it used to be.

Jo: I suppose it also makes a difference whether there is a huge investment. . .ah. . .of self, or I as a chain operation, the business is there or the business is not there and it leaves?

Mr. Potts: Yea. But but the operators today, the owner operators today and I hesitate to call them Mom and Pop because that is not really quite what they are. Many of them are more substantial than that. . .ah. . .and have employees but they are the owners, managers, and they are on they are on site essentially all the hours that the business is open.

Jo: Right.

Mr. Potts: We had an organization with with fifty employees in four different settings.

Jo: Wow.

Mr. Potts: In in four different locations. We also up until 1960 had a an outside collection sales operations where we had collector salesmen on the street and in the territories where they called on people in their homes. . .ah. . .Before the days that the norm was that a person had a car. there was limited transportation so that, and also it was the the of. . .ah. . .only one. . .ah. . .of the couple being a wage earner that we. . .ah. . .called on customers to. . .ah. . .on a regular basis to collect their regular weekly or monthly, . .most payments were weekly prior to World War II, in fact I have here, this is not a collectors book, this is a store book, but there is a payment book from
1935. {.laugh}. .there. . .That the customer gave me, someone that I met many years later. . .ah. . .where the terms were a dollar a week for a studio couch that cost less than 25 dollars.

Jo: I see. So these are the payments.

Mr. Potts: ah ah. . .Those payments were all brought into the store but the customers had this and a collector salesman went to their home if it wasn’t convenient for them to come to the store on weekly basis or a monthly basis, depending. Later it became monthly, but originally it was all weekly.

Jo: Did he have a car? Or did . .

Mr. Potts: Oh he had a car. Some of them had a car, some of them. . .ah. . .towards the end they all had cars but initially. . .ah. . .the ones that had territories that were, that were close together. . .it wasn’t efficient to have a car.

Jo: uuhuh

Mr. Potts: You spent more time getting in and out of the car than you did walking and there was an incentive to see, to have Mrs. Jones introduce you to Mrs. Smith next door, to Mrs. Brown next door, down the line so that you could, so that as a collector salesman that you could establish an account for each one of them, . .selling them maybe ah ah. . .We were never in the apparel business, we were only in the furniture and home furnishings business but we sold domestic, we sold sheets, we sold blankets, we sold. . .we sold curtains, we sold drapes, we sold ready-made slipcovers. . .ah. . .a lot of things. . .a lot of things that the. . .ah. . .that the collector salesman. . .ah. . .could carry a sample of. . .ah. . .Show to the customer. . .ah. . .be able to take the order in that customer’s size and bring it back to him the next week.

Jo: Was this a normal thing for customers, for furniture businesses or. . .

Mr. Potts: The Furniture business was like that from the ‘20’s through the ‘50’s.

Jo: So basically anything to do with the home?
Mr. Potts: Yes. Yes. Yes. And we had . . .we had a, . .ah. . .in the sixties and seventies we had. . .ah. . .all kinds of furniture. . .ah. . .carpet, hard surface floor covering . .ah. . .refrigerators, . .washing machines, T.V. sets, the whole wide of of appliances and entertainment goods. .ah. . .suitable for the customer who bought on installment credit. . .and and and you know we had gas ranges. .ah. . .ah. . .Our goods was divided into something like 25 different classifications of merchandise. .ah. . .and and and a if it was for inside the house. . .ah. . .we pretty much could handle it. . ah. . .including kitchen cabinets with free standing and and ah stuff that that got built in. . .ah. . .One of the the items that sticks out in my mind very clearly is is cabinet sinks that ah. . .is part of the of the general kitchen and appliance category.

Jo: How far does this. . .uhm. . .built in kitchen thing go?

Mr. Potts: We didn’t do the, we didn’t do the labor but we financed the the labor.

Jo: And when did the. . .uhm. . .kitchens become the fashion, to install them...

Mr. Potts: Well, well, what happened really was that. .beginning. .kitchen units were something that became. .well, I’m not sure that the kitchen, that that built in kitchen cabinet didn’t happen a long time back. I. . .I’m trying to think. . .ah. . .that that. . .ah. . .the house I grew up in which was Northwest Baltimore. . .[unintelligible] Pikesville (?) Well the house hat was built originally in the years just before World Wax One. . .ah. . .My parents acquired it in 1927 and moved into it a month before I was born so that I was never an East Baltimore resident. . .ah. . .But always knew where I came from. . .{laugh}.

Jo: And that house had. . .

Mr. Potts: That house had built in cabinets in in what as the pantry when I knew it. . .ah. . .but was originally part of the kitchen but I think that those built in cabinets were there. . .ah. . .that that glass front built in cabinets with glass front tops and and and bases. . .ah. . .that had storage area beneath an open counter. . .ah. . .that they were that existed from like World War One. . .ah. . .However, in the thirties became a steel product that could be factory manufactured and hung and. . .ah. . .the distributor in Baltimore for Youngstown Kitchens, was one of the leading. . .ah. . .appliance customer to them,
so that we were able to sell. We had access to and were able to sell those kind of items to
our customers and the business that we ran the credit furniture business, that existed prior
to World War II, was two businesses in one. It was a merchandise business and a finance
business both. The thought of of buying a product one price and paying somebody else
didn’t exist. That came with the automobile industry. And originally only the automobile
industry credit paper was of high enough security for lenders to willing to take the risk so
that the only channel for credit purchase of furniture by a a blue collar worker who could
afford to pay five dollars a week but was not in position to pay in thirty days which was
the the standard alternate at that time. . .ah,. was a credit furniture store and we had a
relationship with our customers some of which extended into the third and fourth
generations that we had built up over the years. And the thing that killed the credit
furniture business and this is what sent mee back to the University of Baltimore for a
Masters Degree. . \{laugh\}. .after I spent thirty years in the furniture business. . .ah. . .My
Master’s is from 1986. My Undergraduate Degree is from 1939.

Mr. Potts: Undergraduate was a a a Bachelor’s in Business from from from Johns
Hopkins.

Jo: . . .Undergraduate in. . .

Mr. Potts: Undergraduate was a a a Bachelor’s in Business from from from Johns
Hopkins.

Jo: You, . .you mention that they were making payments of five dollars a
week if they could afford it. What would you estimate that their weekly salary?

Mr. Potts: Well . . .I mean what I am saying is that that one. . .It was a dollar a week
when I gave credit. I showed you the book.

Mr. Potts: Depends upon the time. The price level, . .as an example. In 1941 the price
of a Simmoens Beauty Rest mattress, which was a quality mattress, premium quality
mattress, was $39.50. By the time we get to 1947, the price of that same mattress is in the
vicinity of 60–70 dollars so that the complete price level changed. . .ah. . .over the World
War II period. Prices were frozen during World War II but you couldn’t get Beauty Rest
air spring mattresses during World War II anyway. The steel wasn’t available. It went to
...it went to war industry. {pause} so that after price controls came off and there were price adjustments in the second half of the forties, many prices had close to doubled.
Jo: Had the salaries?
Mr. Potts: ah. ...Different world but see. ...when I was, when I worked y first job, the minimum wage was 25 cents an hour as a, as a high school student. ...ah. ...{pause} ...By that time, it was certainly a dollar an hour. ...I have to look up the history. I don’t have that, I don’t have that. You know, when the minimum wage change took place, in my head. But you know. ...ah. ...Unless there is some date that you can, you can connect it with, you know that it happened. ...ah. ...{pause} ...
Jo: You mentioned at one time. ...ah. ...that it was a good idea to, or with hindsight you were able to see that it would have been a good idea to move as the. ...ah ...city expanded
Mr. Potts: The, this. ...all right, the right place for a furniture store is where there is maximum building because within three years of people moving into a new home is when major furniture purchases occur, like at no other time. And when East Baltimore was growing, this was the right place. Also before there were re. ...suburban shopping centers, the neighborhood shopping centers, whether it was Monument Street. or whether it was Highlandtown. or whether it was Old Town Mall, or whether it was Hamilton which was suburban, but also. ...oh. ...ah. ...pretty rural too kind of thing. or a number of similar situations on the on the West side of the city. ...ah ...people — and there was good transportation. People came to those shopping areas and the Northeast [?] Market was the focus for the Monument Street retail district development. In fact, and you may have heard me say this at at class, the 500 block of Chester Street which is the block of Chester Street south of the Market, was a retail area before Monument Street was a retail area. And that the properties facing the Market on both, on all four sides were the important retail location or the ideal retail location. What happened is that, as the retail area began to develop, it began to develop from the market out. It couldn’t go East and it couldn’t go West because there, because the properties there. ...ah. ...were institutional where
where. . .ah. . .ah. . .the. . .there is a Hopkins Garage that has retail on the front of
between Castle Street and and Washington Street on the North side of Monument and
that was ah Saint Andrews Catholic Church, the whole property there where that from
from. . .ah. . .from Monument to Madison. and from Castle to or just about all the way
from Castle to Washington was all. . .ah. . .St. Andrew’s. Ah Now that was at Monument
and Washington. St. Wenceslaus here was at at Ashland (?) and at at Collin. that was
only two blocks away. That was not ethnic.

Jo: I was going to ask. . .

Mr. Potts: St. Wenceslaus was, was ethnic, was Bohemian.

Jo: Right.

Mr. Potts: And they didn’t. . .they didn’t conflict with each other because they had a
different demographic

Jo: But. . .

Mr. Potts: population.

Jo: But this was also a Catholic Church?

Mr. Potts: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Jo: I noticed how many churches there were as I circled in.

Mr. Potts: Yes. . .ah. . .so that the business district expanded East of with its strength
being the 2100 block and the 2200 block and it extended. . .ah. . .essentially to Milton
Avenue as pretty dense from in those, what is it, . .Chester to Collington, Collington to
Patterson Park. Patterson Park to Mountford, Mountford to Milton. Those four blocks is,
are pretty. . .There are a couple of non-store fronts still in the 2400 block but the rest of it
is all solid story. And it is ninety some percent occupied.

Jo: When you were talking about the. . .ah. . .the city growing and what. . .ah
. .we’ve just talked about what. Did the composition of of the neighborhood here
change. . .or did it remain level for forty years?
Mr. Potts: What changed was this. .ah. {pause}. .Working class Baltimore. .ah. .residentially tends to still be segregated. .ah. .The further up the economic scale one gets the segregated so that. .ah. .ah. .when you get near the top you can have the head of Blue Cross Blue Shield, .ah. .William Jews who is African American, .ah. .live next door to. .ah, . .I have no idea where he lives, but living you know, in whatever neighborhood he chooses. .ah. .And is more of the the. .ah. .Baltimore socialites, not not not Bachelors’ Cotillion kind of socialite, but ah. .ah. .ah. .the the movers and shakers kind of socialite. .ah. .ah. .and, however, East Baltimore which has always been primarily working class, some shade of blue collar, maybe it gets to be very light blue. But as opposed to to a a a high percentage of professional. .ah. .is not mixed so when when the. .ah. .Black community started. .ah. .really needing more elbow room. .ah. .and began moving into areas that had previously been predominantly white. .ah. .the residents were inclined to, the previous residents, were inclined to run. .ah. .and in terms of shopping what is now Old Town Mall, which I can remember in the ’30s. .ah. .was mixed. .ah. .became almost completely black. That Monument Street shoppers who, that the white ones tended to go Highlandtown.

Jo: Which was newer at the time.

Mr. Potts: Highlandtown is still white. .primarily. But people who would live three blocks from Monument Street, would go a mile and a half two miles. to Highland Town rather than shop a mixed neighborhood.

Jo: And at that time, was there public transport or would they need their car?

Mr. Potts: They needed their cars and. .

Jo: And by that time most people did. .Could you give me a. .a year?

Mr. Potts: That was a that was . .the automobile phenomenon.— it’s still growing. There more cars on the street every year. .ah. .really began to expand when. .ah. .when automobile. civilian automobile production—resumed after World War Two and it has been. .The number of cars on the road has been growing every year since then.
Jo: You mention that people bought furniture on credit. I presume that you, if you extended credit you would, found out where they worked?

Mr. Potts: Oh, we knew where. Oh sure, sure.

Jo: Can you give me a sampling of where people worked?

Mr. Potts: Well, right. This is a record of an account that was opened in September of 1963. The people lived in the Eske area of and our credit information says that they owned their home for seventeen years. That the husband was employed with the Pennsylvania Railroad for twenty-four years. That they had a loan with Union Trust Bank. That in 1960 that they had paid as they agreed to pay it. That they had a loan that was financed through Equitable Trust Bank. Also from Vopen in May of 1958 and paid in February 1960, for 1467 dollars and they paid that as they had promised to pay it, and they had a couple of other references that were very good. Ah. Here’s another one. An account that was opened in 1960 where they lived in the area that is East of Highlandtown and North of Dundalk, that. . .he is twenty-four, They were renting. . .They had two former addresses in the same general area, . .that he worked for a firm by the name of Kirby and McGuire who were contractors, . .previously he had been in the Army, . .he came here because he had a brother who had opened an account with us, ah. . .had a previous reference with another furniture store. . .that was opened in 1959, ah. . .that the purchase was was ninety-five dollars and when the report. . .was received in January of 1960 that they had reduced that balance to twenty-two dollars and had paid it as they said they would. Had a jewelry account with a high credit of two hundred and twenty-nine dollars that they had been paying. . .as agreed. . .and that they were a very good account. . .However, they also show that they had an account, that they applied for an account with Fidelity, a loan with Fidelity Baltimore National Bank and that was declined, Ah. . .this is the account of the brother. . .that had been opened. . .a month or so ahead of this one, of the one we just spoke about. That they lived. . .not at the address given, but but at
the previous address for fourteen years, that he was employed with Social Security as a programmer for seven years. . . . and that they had. . . . . three different payment references that all were paid as they had promised to pay them. ah. . . . These were just picked up at random. . . . . . and and. . . . . . . . gives you an example of the kind of information that we obtained.

Jo: Great. You told me earlier that you worked in the store from a very young age. [noise:tahp]

Mr. Potts: Well. I was. . . . . I started. . . . . I sort of knew from the time I was a a little kid that I was going to end up in the family business. From the time I was old enough to visit the store and not cause more trouble than I was worth. . . . . I learned to operate the telephone switchboard that. . . . . at about age eight and learned how to operate the elevator about age ten which I couldn’t do legally until I was eighteen, I think.

Jo: The same one I came up?

Mr. Potts: The same one {laugh} ah. . . . . and and a was generally familiar with what was going on. I knew. . . ah. . . . . the business operations. . . . . long before I. . . . . was a full time employee. During Christmas seasons while I was in school. . . ah. . . . . after school on Saturdays. I ran an additional delivery run. . ah. . . . with with a. . . ah. . . . . with. . . ah. . . . . one of the trucks. The. . . . the. . . real cause for the demise of not only Little Potts, but a whole lot of businesses that. . . . a. . . had existed doing business the same way. . . ah. . . was the advent of universal credit, that with the arrival of of credit cards that would be issued to almost anybody that the that the loyalty that was built between families and where they had credit established was no longer a valid reason for buying there. . . ah. . . and what no one on the outside ever understood, was that the credit furniture business really was a quite marginal business and that when. . . ah. . . . . . the loyalty factor. . ah. . . made it economical. ‘cause it’s always, it’s always cheaper to resell customers you have done business with and are satisfied with their purchases than it is to attract new customers who feel much . . . that you are an unknown factor. ah. . . That when the balance was, say ah two-thirds repeat business and one third new business. . ah. . . that was, that made that marginal business viable. But when you had to attract two-thirds of the business and only
had one-third repeat business, that the cost of attracting those new customers.. ah. . .was a sufficiently increased cost that that type of business ceased to be viable and over a decade or a decade and a half, almost all those businesses, except those dealing with the very high credit risks, disappeared, including ours. We were one of the first ones out. But it took me to return to graduate school at U-of-B. . .ah. . .to discover enough of the factors to be able to figure that out. I couldn’t figure it out while it was happening. I knew when it was happening I might have been able to modify the operation of the business enough to have not liquidated.

Jo: So. . .you speak of a marginal business. Ah. . .What do you mean exactly by that?

Mr. Potts: Marginal really means marginally profitable. that that one year it would make money, the next year it would lose money. No years were the profits great, and in general the total of the losses exceeded the total of the profits for the last decade of its operation.

Jo: So ah did many of your customers default?

Mr. Potts: Well. . .au. . .part of the credit furniture business. . .
From the early 30s, I was a very small child, maybe four years old, maybe five years old ah, in the the depths of the depression, where there was a substantial bill that people did not have the ability to pay, and they also had a car that they couldn’t afford to keep, and my father accepted the car—it was a Model A Ford—ah. .and it was four five years old that he accepted in full payment of their bill. ah. .There were a number of instances during that same period. .ah. .where people did not have the ability to pay, that we went along with them. .ah. .and when things got better. .ah. .they paid their balances. ah. .I can remember during periods in the fifties, after I was in the .. out of college and in the business full time that there would be periods when. .ah. .ah. .people who worked at Bethlehem Steel would go out on strike and the strikes would last three months or something of the sort and during the period that they were on strike, they couldn’t pay their bills. .ah. .that whatever kind of income they had. .ah. .let’s assume it was strike pay. .ah. .that. .ah. .would have to go for food and we would have to wait. Ah . .Those were situations where where there were there were causes beyond the the customer’s control. .ah. .But there were, yes, we didn’t guess all credit risk correctly. ah. .In fact there is a a a general formula that says that if you are unduly restrictive in extending credit, you lose more in gross margin than you save in credit losses and if the object is to maximize the profit of the business you have to expect to take some credit risks that don’t work out. Now, if you’re too liberal in extending credit, then those those credit losses. .ah. .aren’t offset by increased gross profit and you come out worse off so that part of the judgment in extending credit has to do with where you can maximize profit and that is a decision that. .ah. .is examined every time one approves or disapproves. .ah. .the extension of credit.

Jo: You have just been talking about people. .ah. .living during the Depression and doing their best to pay their bills when they got the money. Ah. .Did you find that people had a better respect for their debts at the time. .ah. .than they did
later? Ah. . .was it. . .now there seems to be a tendency to declare bankruptcy
. . .\textit{unintelligible}

\textbf{Mr. Potts:} Oh that that . . .oh there was a . . .there was a much, I believe that there
was a great, a much greater sense of of personal honor and responsibility in. . .ah. . .the
days. . .ah. . .ah. . .preceeding World War II. . .ah. . .than there has been in the years
following Vietnam. The. . .I think that the deterioration. . .ah. . .was. . .existed, but slow
between those two periods. ah. . .The the. . .ah. . .frustrations of Vietnam changed the
outlook of the average American substantially I believe. And having lived the years that I
did. . .ah. . .prior to World War II and. . .ah. . .getting my parents’ values implanted
during that period. . .ah. . .I look at things differently than than. ah. . .to a certain extent
my children, some of it rubbed rubbed off on my children, but certainly differently than
my grandchildren see the world.

\textbf{Jo:} You did at some time own rental property in the neighborhood?

\textbf{Mr. Potts:} ah. . .We have never been in the residential real estate business. . .ah. . .for
one reason or another we acquired. . .ah. . .a rental property here, a rental property there. .
. .ah. . .wc. . .ah. . .over the years acquired a like three of the houses. . .ah. . .on in the 700
block of Felman [?] Street. . .ah. . .that we had thought about at one time expansion. In
fact two of them. . .ah. . .wc used for small goods warehousing. . .ah. . .the the the soft
goods that that our collector-salesmen used to use too. . .were stored in there, . .the small
wares that they could take with them. . .ah. . .that. . .ah. . .We owned some, a few
residential properties. . .ah. . .on Rutland Avenue. . .au. . .adjacent to our main furniture
warehouse. ah. . .It is land that is now occupied by the Hopkins-Rutland Garage. It was
for future expansion of that warehouse. ah. . .We owned a couple or three rental
properties down in ah Brooklyn, South Baltimore, it is within the city but it is almost a
suburb on the south end of Baltimore that we had originally bought with the expectation
of of opening a branch, which we never did, but we never were in the residential housing
business for a profit.

\textbf{Jo:} Right. I was trying to tie in. . .ah. . .what you had just been saying about
. . .ah. . .credit worthiness, asking if people would be paying their rent but obviously I
can’t do that.
Mr. Potts: ah. . .We have never been very good residential landlords because we have never been mean enough.

Jo: \{laugh\}

Mr. Potts: I really believe that the only way to be an effective residential landlord. . .ah. . .ah. . .in this kind of of East Baltimore property today is is to have no heart and we couldn’t operate a furniture business like that and we can’t we couldn’t operate residential properties and we have always shied away from. . .ah. . .In addition to which the goodwill. . .ah. . .needed to be a successful furniture retailer and the inability to retain goodwill by being an effective landlord were counter-productive.

Jo: Right. ah. . .I’d be interested to know, when people came to. . .ah. . .buy furniture was it always the man who made the decision, always the woman or was it just a normal mix?

Mr. Potts: The the general rule of thumb is that, and I have to talk about the . . .I have to talk the the generally the seventies because if you go much before the seventies, my head blurs, but in in the seventies I would say that the general pattern was that in most instances, the style choice was the woman’s, the dollar decision. . .ah. . .was either joint or the man’s.

Jo: So really things haven’t changed that much, typically speaking\{laugh\}?\n
Mr. Potts: I don’t know what it is today ‘cause we always operated differently because I was in the field and I always had the picking as to style.

Jo: ah. . .I’m going to talk about employees now. ah. . .Could you describe the ethnic and gender composition of your employees?

Mr. Potts: Yes, ah. . .the. . .It’s interesting and the rules are not hard and fast. . .ah. . .but what I’m talking about. I’m talking about dominant, not exclusive. . .ah. . .and that is that the sales people, dominant was Jewish; the office people, dominant was female; the warehouse and delivery people, dominant was African American.

Jo: Male or female?

Mr. Potts: Male. . .all muscle work.

Jo: Right.
Mr. Potts: That. . .ah. . .our office was integrated in the mid fifties. . .ah. . .and our sales force was integrated. . .ah. . .in the early seventies I guess. I don’t think it was integrated before that ah. . .and in the seventies there were both men and women and. . .ah. . .and Jewish and Gentile and African American in the sales force.

Jo: You talked to us about. . .ah. . .an African American lady joining you

Mr. Potts: Well, okay, that was the integration of the office. That was in the 50’s. And that was a young woman who was a student at Morgan State University. I guess is what its name now is, it was Morgan State College in those days. . .who ah lived with us. . .as I guess by today’s language an “Au Pair”. . .and was with us like ah four nights a week. . .and I used to.. ah. . .take her to Morgan on my way to work in the morning and we had an opening in the in a position to maintain our mailing list which was a position that was, because of the noise that the mailing equipment made, . . .was away from the regular office. . .and there was no problem. I brought her, I brought her in. ah. . .She certainly was intelligent enough to do the work. . .and I brought her in in that position and there wasn’t any problem as long as she was in that position. an. . .She did that well and brought the work up to date and. . .and she still needed the job to to pay her, to help pay her tuition. . .and our personnel policies always have been tried to provide a measure of of security and reliability to our personnel so instead of saying don’t have any work now, I found something else for her to do and I moved her into another filing position. . .of, it didn’t have any mechanical work, it was simply a lot of typing and filing. That was with other people that were that were all white and one of the people. . .in that group. . .was a woman who had started with us in 1937. Now this is, this is like twenty years later and she wasn’t a kid when she started with us, an’. . .lived in the neighborhood and. . .in that position. . .When I when I made this job assignment, this woman who was a posting machine operator. . .and cashier I guess, . . .says to me “I’m not gonna work alongside a her!” and. . .I say she was ten years old when I started here – I mean I was ten years old when she started here – I’ll get this straight. Obviously, she had been around for
twenty years. I said “Well you know where the door is” {laugh} . .And when when we liquidated the furniture business in 1981, ah well maybe she had, maybe she had retired in in 1980, but she got the message and that was the last question we ever had about integration.

Jo: Going back for a moment to the clientele. . .ah. . .where did you draw them from, the surrounding neighborhood. or suburbs?

Mr. Potts: ah. . .What I did say before was that the right place for a furniture store is where there is a whole residential development. . .ah. . .so that ah up until the end of World War II ah. . .the residential development was all in the city and the area. . .ah. . .of, that today is is along Edison Highway is is nearby. Belair Road neighborhood was still being built up. In fact, I car remember in the fifties which is. . .ah. . .after I was around full time. . .ah. . .doing. . .ah. . .furnishings and model homes in the Belair area. . .ah. . . Those. . .ah. . .people were close enough so that they continued to shop on Monument Street. It wasn’t until. . .ah. . .the major regional shopping malls, not necessarily the enclosed malls. . .ah. . .came on the scene that the shift from city to suburb for retail shop became a significant factor. . .ah. . .and if you look at the dates that the department stores. . .ah. . .began to shift away from downtown to Howard, Lexington Street. . .ah. . .is the same time that that. . .ah. . .that retailing shifted to the suburb. People would travel further to a furniture store. . .ah. . .because it is really the third size purchase that peo, that the family makes. The largest purchase is a home. The second largest purchase is an automobile. And the third largest purchase is the type of goods that we sold. ah. . .So they would travel further—the bigger the purchase, the further they’ll travel to to to make a purchase ah. . .that ali. . .so that people continued to come to Monument Street. Also this factor, that Levinson Clark who were either the largest or the second largest home furnishings retailer in Baltimore for many years were in the building at 2024 East Monument that is now occupied by by Johns Hopkins. . .ah. . .and. . .ah.. drew from all over and were a dominant. . .ah. . .newspaper advertiser. . .ah. . .so that. . .ah. . .while we ran second. . .ah. . .and we were in many ways stronger in the neighborhood than they
were, that Monument Street remained a strong retail furniture center for the Eastern half of the city long after it ceased to be that for apparel. When it became only a neighborhood center for apparel, it continued to be a regional center for furniture and home furnishings.