

Voices of the 250th Interview with Walter Frank 05-21-2026

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Walter Frank and Cliff Robinson conducted on May 21, 2026. The interview took place at the Princeton Public Library as part of the Voices of Princeton Project's Voices of the 250th collection.

VOICES
of Princeton

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Cliff Robinson [00:00:00]

So, my name is Cliff Robinson. Could you please state your name?

Walter Frank [00:00:04]

Walter Frank.

Cliff Robinson [00:00:06]

How did you come to Princeton, and how long have you been here?

Walter Frank [00:00:10]

Let's see, I've been here since 1986. My wife and I came here with our two very young children from New York City, Greenwich Village. We had been living at a wonderful place called Patchin Place, which was sort of an interesting place in and of itself. We had been hoping that at some point, as many New Yorkers did, it would go co-op. It never did. We had two children, and since we decided that neither of them would thrive sleeping on the windowsill, we needed more space. My wife was raised in Montgomery, and her mom had moved to Princeton, and so we came here in '86 to Patton Avenue, and then we moved about eight years later to our current location on Sturgis Way, which is right across from Riverside School.

Cliff Robinson [00:01:02]

Perfect. Thank you. And so, okay, so my next question, thinking back to 1976, what do you remember most about the observance of the US Bicentennial?

Walter Frank [00:01:17]

Well, I remember with very fond affection, because I was, it was my second year at the Port Authority, and we were working at the World Trade Center, and so we were on the 66th floor, and so we had a wonderful view of the tall ships, and it was also a family time, because my sister was visiting from Australia with her young children at that time. I had just been married. We had just been married for just a year at that point. So it really was a very warm time, and we saw the tall ships during the day, which is very exciting. And then that was on the west side, and then on the east side we all went to the other side of the building and watched the fireworks over the East River. So I remember that moment with, with great affection.

Cliff Robinson [00:02:05]

That's wonderful. Comparing that time to today when we were approaching the 250th, how do those two milestones feel alike or different to you?

Walter Frank [00:02:16]

Very different. For one thing, when I think about milestones in my own life, was in 1975, 76 I would have been 31, I'm now close to 81, so one marks the beginning and one marks getting close to the expiration date. But politically it was also a very different time. Our institutions had worked. Richard Nixon had tried to engage in a cover-up. He had been caught, and his own party, Barry Goldwater, went to, went to him and said, "You're going to be convicted if you're, and that's what led to his resignation. So, in a sense, there was a lot to celebrate at that moment. We had weathered a storm to a certain degree, and Nixon had an enemies list, which today it

seems almost benign compared to what we've got going on right now, but it was a different, it was a different time, and it doesn't feel like a milestone today, it feels like we're in the middle of a maelstrom.

Cliff Robinson [00:03:22]

Wow, thank you. This one, yeah. Okay, so as you imagine the country changing over the next 50 years, what kind of political future do you hope for?

Walter Frank [00:03:38]

Well, I am still very, very hopeful. I, you know, now, how much of that is based on evidence and how much is based on temperament, I'm not so sure, but the danger we're facing right now, I think, in the larger sense, is the way that both our social structure and our immediate way we communicate just encourages those with the most extreme views to get the most attention, and that can be very, that can be very debilitating. I actually have written a book on antebellum America, which is going to be published early next year by a bankrupt publishing company. So I thought a lot about the period before the Civil War, and in many ways the United States was a very, very successful country in 1860. It had an economy that was already becoming, to some extent, the envy of the world. There were a lot of very positive things about it, but they couldn't negotiate the problem of slavery in a way that was satisfactory. Now, we had mixed feelings about the Civil War, because it did have this wonderful result of leading to the emancipation of slavery, but for the people at the time, 700,000 young men died in that civil war, and so a lot of those contemporaries would have definitely wanted to avoid it. What was one of the things, one of the things that I think led to the to the war was the way in which both in the north and the

south, it became increasingly hard for people who just wanted to see if they could find some way to negotiate this very horrible institution, maybe slowly eliminate it, and they couldn't do it, because in the South, extreme independence voices had slowly taken over, and in the North, as much as you admire abolitionists and feel that they were sort of on the right side, morally, politically, they were used by the South as a foil to encourage the independence movement there as well. So it's a complicated time, but you asked me what I feel for the future, I'm very optimistic because of the kind of a deep faith in people's understanding of things, but I worry that extreme voices will dominate the conversation in a way that will not help the country and will lead us to be making mistakes, which unfortunately I think we're in the beginning of that, possibly right now, but hopefully it will not last.

Cliff Robinson [00:06:26]

Thank you. That's a really thoughtful answer. So, when you think about the ideals of 1776 how do they show up or not in politics today?

Walter Frank [00:06:36]

Well, they show up more by their absence, I think, than anything else. I mean, one of the things that is very troubling, and this is true of both parties, I think, is that let's put it this way, one of the things that I think our founders would find most perplexing is how politics has become a career. They didn't envision it that way, partly because travel was so difficult, but who would want to stay away from family for as long as you might have to, and, and Washington, D.C. was no picnic to live in, so you know, the, the, let's see, the question is, How do the ideals show up? You know, I think we need to get back to this notion of the two parties each representing

something good and not vilify each other, you know. It's interesting. Go back to 1976 etc., let's say, the Republicans stood for a certain prioritizing of the private sector. The stories they like to tell were of people who had made it the hard way, etc. The Democrats liked stories about villages and compassion. You knew the impulses of each party, and together they made kind of a whole with sometimes one prevailing over the other, depending on the needs of the moment, etc. We don't have that feeling today. Now, both parties want the other to fail, which can only be bad for the country. You know, a lot of the critical legislation that was passed in the 1960s, the civil rights legislation, Medicare, Medicaid, they all had bipartisan support, some more than others, but basically they had bipartisan support, and today you know one of the reasons that, you know, any legislation that passed is almost has potentially an expiration date is because they don't have bipartisan support by and large. Now today I just read that there was a bipartisan bill passed on housing, which that would be terrific if it was, assuming it was, had real teeth.

Cliff Robinson [00:08:53]

Okay. Thank you. Last question, if there's not—if there's anything that we haven't talked about, but you'd like to speak to any stories, for example, about Princeton's past, which you feel aren't well known enough. Is there anything you want to share?

Walter Frank 9:08]

I think I bored you enough.

Cliff Robinson [00:09:10]

Okay. Thank you for the interview.