

Ruth M. Batson, Oral History Interview – 1/24/1979
Administrative Information

Creator: Ruth M. Batson
Interviewer: Sheldon Stern
Date of Interview: January 24, 1979
Place of Interview: Boston, MA
Length: 20 pages

Biographical Note

Batson, 1952 Senate campaign worker for John F. Kennedy (JFK), president of the New England Regional Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from 1957 to 1960, and Massachusetts political figure, discusses JFK's senate and presidential campaigns, disappointment over JFK's civil rights record, and the 1962 Senate race between Edward Moore Kennedy and Edward J. McCormack, Jr., among other issues.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed June 5, 2002, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Ruth M. Batson, recorded interview by Sheldon Stern, January 24, 1979, (page number),
John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Gift of Papers and Other Historical Materials

Of

Ruth M. Batson

To the

John F. Kennedy Library

This Deed of Gift, made this 7 day of May, 2002 by Ms. Ruth M. Batson, The Ruth M. Batson Educational Foundation, 250 Cambridge Street, Suite 701, Boston, MA 02114 and The United States of America acting on behalf of the John F. Kennedy Library

WITNESSETH the following:

FIRST: In accordance with the provisions of chapter 21 of title 44, United States Code and Subject to the terms, conditions, and restrictions hereinafter set forth, Ms. Ruth M. Batson (hereinafter referred to as the "Donor"), does hereby irrevocably give, donate and convey to the United States of America (hereinafter referred to as the "Donee" for immediate deposit in the John F. Kennedy Library, papers, books and other historical materials (hereinafter referred to as the "Materials."))

SECOND: The Donor warrants that immediately prior to the execution of this Deed of Gift, it possessed title to and all rights and interests in the donated Materials free and clear of all liens, claims, charges and encumbrances.

THIRD: Title to the Materials shall pass from the Donor to the Donee upon acceptance of this gift by the Archivist of the United States and delivery of the Materials to the Archivist of the United States or his designee.

FOURTH: Following delivery of the Materials to the Archivist of the United States or their designee, the Materials shall thereafter be maintained and administered by the Donee in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, in accordance with the pertinent provisions of chapter 21 of title 44, United States Code.

FIFTH: It is the Donor's wish that the Materials be made available for research as soon as possible, and to the fullest extent possible, following their deposit in the John F. Kennedy Library. At the same time, they recognize that the Materials may include information about others the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy and information the protection of which is essential to the Nation's security. Accordingly, the Archivist shall have the Materials reviewed and for the present shall restrict from public access the following classes of material:

a. Papers and other historical materials the disclosure of which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy or a libel of a living person.

b. Papers and other historical materials that are specifically authorized under criteria established by statute or Executive order to be kept secret in the interest of national defense or foreign policy, and are in fact properly classified pursuant to such statute or Executive order.

1. Following the completion of the review provided for above, material restricted from public access shall not be made available for inspection, reading, or use by anyone, except regular employees of the National Archives and Records Administration in the performance of normal archival work on such materials, and the Donor or persons authorized by it in writing to have access to such materials; provided that information which is security-classified pursuant to statute or Executive order shall be made available only in accordance with procedures established to govern the availability of such information.
2. Materials which have been restricted from public access as herein provided shall be reviewed by the Archivist from time to time or promptly upon written request by Donor or persons authorized by them and papers which because of the passage of time or other circumstances, no longer require such restrictions shall be opened to public access.
3. Subject to the restrictions imposed herein, the Archivist may dispose of any of the Materials which the Archivist determines to have no permanent value or historical interest, or to be surplus to the needs of the Library, provided that prior to any such disposal, reasonable efforts are made to notify the Donor, in writing, and offer to return such Materials to Donor.
4. The Donor hereby gives and assigns to the United States of America all copyrights which the Donor has in (a) such of the Materials as are unpublished and (b) in such of his unpublished writings as may be among any collections of papers received by the United States of America from others and deposited in any depository administered by any agency of the United States of America.
5. The Archivist may enter into agreements for the temporary deposit of the Materials under the Archivist's custody and control in a depository administered by the National Archives and Records Administration or other qualified depository.

6. In the event that the Donor may from time to time hereafter give, donate, and convey to the United States of America, for deposit in the John f. Kennedy Library, additional papers and other historical materials, title to such additional papers and other historical materials shall pass to the United States of America upon their delivery to the Archivist, and all of the foregoing provisions of this Deed of Gift shall be applicable to such additional papers and other historical materials. A description of the additional papers and other historical materials so donated and delivered shall be prepared and attached hereto.

Signed: Lyette M. Batson
Donor

Date: 5/18/02

Pursuant to the authority of chapter 21 of title 44, United States Code, the foregoing gift of the papers and other historical materials of the Donor is determined to be in the public interest and is accepted on behalf of the United States of America, subject to the terms, conditions, and restrictions set forth herein.

Signed: John W. Carl
Archivist of the United States

Date: 6-5-02

Ruth M. Batson

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Working for John F. Kennedy's (JFK) 1952 Senate campaign
2	Power struggle in 1956 over chairmanship of the Massachusetts State democratic committee
4	Civil Rights Act of 1957
6	JFK's 1958 Senate campaign
7	Meeting with JFK in 1958
9	Batson's work in JFK's civil rights office at the 1960 Democratic National Convention
12	JFK's presidential campaign
14	1962 Senate race between Edward Moore Kennedy and Edward J. McCormack, Jr.
15	JFK and Robert F. Kennedy on civil rights
16	School desegregation in Boston in 1963
17	Lyndon Baines Johnson
18	1964 Democratic National Convention

Oral History Interview

with

Ruth M. Batson

January 24, 1979
Boston, Massachusetts

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: Why don't we begin with your first contacts with Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] and what year it was and how you came to know him.

BATSON: Well, I had always had an interest in politics, and when Kennedy decided to run first for Senate, I decided to work in his campaign. As a child I was always interested in the Kennedy family. At the time of the first senatorial campaign I lived in the Orchard Park Housing Project in Roxbury which was a low-income housing project--with my three children and my husband. I had run for the Boston School Committee at one time because of my interest in education. So when I saw that a Kennedy was going to run for Senate, I decided to go down and volunteer to work in the office.

STERN: This is when he opposed Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge] in '52?

BATSON: Yes, that was Lodge.

STERN: Right.

BATSON: So a friend of mine and I decided we'd go down and we'd work in the campaign. Of course, we never saw the candidate very much. Just seeing the

family members was very interesting. I think Ted Kennedy [Edward Moore Kennedy] was only a teenager at that time. We got to know the sisters. Parties on behalf of the candidate were held in various people's homes. I decided to have a party in my house, and Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] came to my party. I can remember it all very clearly. She wore a big felt skirt with Kennedy written all over the bottom of the skirt. The party was so jammed; my apartment was small--four rooms. We had to let people in, in two sections. And to this day, people still comment to me on that party. Even those who were kids at that time remember the excitement of standing and looking on outside. That was the magic of the Kennedys.

[-1 -]

STERN: The candidate didn't come though?

BATSON: No, he didn't come. Eunice came. But people still say that's where I met Kennedys and some insist that they met Kennedy, *the* Kennedy there, when actually they had met Eunice Kennedy. So, that, that started my activity.

In 1956, the Democratic State Committee elections came along--by that time I had moved up to Roxbury, in ward twelve. A friend of mine came over and said, "Ruth, you know these state committee elections? Nobody pays them any attention, and there has never been a black person on the state committee. Why don't you run? I think you could ease in." And so I said, "What's the point?" He said, "Well, it's just that the Democratic party is supposed to be the liberal party, and there's never been a black person on the state committee and I think you're the person who could do it." So very quietly, we set about planning this campaign. If elected, that would mean I would represent Roxbury, Dorchester and Hyde Park. You can imagine what that was like in those days. But, we campaigned. Most of our votes came from Roxbury, and the Jewish community in Dorchester. And lo and behold, I was elected. The representative from Hyde Park said at that time that this would be the last time a black woman would represent Hyde Park, and it was. [Laughter]

STERN: Did you get involved in the struggle between the McCormack [Edward J. McCormack, Jr.] force....

BATSON: This is what I'm coming to.

STERN: Okay. Great.

BATSON: The minute I got elected, I found myself an instant celebrity in a sense because of the struggle for power between McCormack and Kennedy around the chairmanship of the committee.

STERN: Right.

BATSON: Well, I was very fond of Eddie McCormack, and he was supporting the present chairman, the then existing chairman, Burke [William H. Burke, Jr.].

Jack Kennedy was supporting Pat [John M. Lynch]...

STERN: Lynch.

BATSON: ...Lynch, Pat Lynch, yes. And, so everybody was vying for these votes. In the meantime there was a so-called power maker in our community by the name of Harry Silva [Harry L. Silva] who was supporting Burke's candidacy. He even offered me money to vote for Burke. I had decided to support Eddie McCormack's candidate just because I liked him (McCormack). I had worked for the Kennedys. I had never heard a word from them after I worked

[-2-]

for them. Nobody ever said even a thank you, and there were very few black people who worked at that time for the Kennedys. So I said, well, I might as well vote with the guy I know, because I like to do things in which I consider an intelligent way, I went down to meet Mr. Burke. I went in and here was this great big man, at least he appeared big to me since I'm short. As I stepped in the office, he looked at me, and he said, "Well, sit down." He then said, "My God, I'm really relieved to meet you." So, I said, "Well, why is that?" He said, "Well, when they told me a colored woman had won the election, I was scared to meet her. I didn't know if she could talk or what." So, that settled that. [Laughter].

So, with that, out the door I went. And I said, "I don't care what the other guy looks like, that's who I'm voting for."

So, I went over and I met Pat Lynch who was nice, gentle, sweet guy, you know, and introduced myself to him. I had about made up my mind who I was going to vote for. But, I didn't want to hurt Eddie McCormack.

And Herbie Tucker [Herbert E. Tucker, Jr.] called me up one day at work and said that he had been asked by Jack Kennedy to call me and ask for my vote. So, I said, "Well, Herbie, if it will do you any good to say you got my vote, just say it. But you know, I'm not going to vote for that other guy." And I told him the story. So, he was always credited with getting my vote. When in essence I had already made up my mind.

STERN: I see.

BATSON: ...I had decided...

STERN: I just read about that in his interview.

BATSON: Yes. Jack Kennedy held a reception. We met and shook hands. I expected great things from the state committee, and of course, nothing happened. The day of the chairman's election was very explosive. You can imagine being the only black person in this explosive group....

STERN: Probably not many women either.

BATSON: Well, there were half women and half men, an even number.

STERN: Oh, that's right, I remember that.

BATSON: And, I sat down beside this woman who looked fairly friendly. Her name was Mary Kennedy--I'll never forget her, she's died since--and she said, "Are you as frightened as I am?" I said, "Yes, I've never been to anything like this before." People were mad.

STERN: Yeah, the accounts of the meeting are...

[-3-]

BATSON: Oh, they were terrible.

STERN: ...that there was almost violence.

BATSON: There was violence. And by this time they had to carry Burke out because he was so violent. [Laughter]. A man stood behind us, looked at the two of us sitting there, and said, "Who are these two?" Another answered, "I don't know. Those are the kind you see at the weddings and the wakes." [Laughter]. So, that was my next entree into politics with the Kennedys.

In April 1957, I was elected president of the New England Regional Conference of NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] Branches. I was getting more and more involved with the NAACP. We became involved with the passage of the Civil Rights Act [Civil Rights Act of 1957]. It was my duty to lobby our New England congressional representatives. It was then that I became very disappointed in the way Senator Kennedy voted on this bill. He had said he wasn't going to vote for the crippling amendments being attached to the bill. I had sent him a telegram and written to him, and he said he would not vote for them. And, I was very disappointed when he reversed himself and....

STERN: Can, can we just read into the record the telegram which...

BATSON: Yes.

STERN: ...which he sent to you in response to your message about the crippling amendments?

BATSON: It was sent to me, Ruth Batson, President, New England Regional Conference, NAACP, 150 Ruthven Street, Roxbury.

STERN: This is July '57?

BATSON: And, this is July tenth, '57. Yes. It says, "Received your telegram. You may be assured I will support civil rights bill without crippling amendments. Have

been meeting with Senators Douglas [Paul H. Douglas] and Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] on issue. Will support closure to end debate and will oppose sending bill to committee. Senator John F. Kennedy.” So, you can see I was very disappointed when I found that he did not keep his word.

STERN: Right. Now he did of course vote to send it to the committee...

BATSON: Yes.

STERN: ...to the Judiciary Committee.

BATSON: Yes.

[-4-]

STERN: And then you wrote to him after that?

BATSON: Then I wrote to him after that. That's right.

STERN: He tried to explain the vote.

BATSON: And he explained, tried to explain what had happened. And as you know we have the copies of the letters.

STERN: Right. I saw some evidence that he sent, in '57, he sent Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] up here...

BATSON: Yes.

STERN: ...to try to explain.

BATSON: He did.

STERN: Do you have any recollection of that?

BATSON: Very, very little. I do know that Ted Sorensen was the intermediary. And it seems to me, I'm not sure, you'd have to check this out with somebody else, but it seems to me that at the NAACP national convention, that I referred to--that was the first convention I went to as president of the New England Conference--that Sorensen attended that meeting, that convention too.

STERN: You mean the NAACP in Detroit?

BATSON: The NAACP in Detroit. I remember people being very, very angry with Kennedy, and attributing his vote to his presidential ambitions which were

known by that time....

STERN: Sure, becoming clear.

BATSON: People were saying he wanted to stay in with the southern delegates and that it was more important to him to have southern support. I felt very bad because I didn't think he would do that. Kennedy was now preparing to run for reelection.

STERN: Fifty-eight?

BATSON: Fifty-eight.

STERN: Right.

BATSON: And, I was not called upon to or asked to do anything in the campaign by him or the campaign committee. And I, as you know, was very involved with my work as president of the NAACP. But he sent a woman

[-5-]

by the name of Marjorie Lawson [Marjorie McKenzie Lawson].

STERN: Belford Lawson's [Belford V. Lawson] wife.

BATSON: Marjorie Belford Lawson. She came up to run Kennedy's office which kind of infuriated some of the black politicians around Boston who wondered why he had to import somebody to Boston to run his office. The Kennedys reached out, constantly to outsiders, particularly among the black people. I never thought that they used the black talent within the cities in the way that they should, that they always reached out and got other people. Maybe they did this with white people to, but I'm just talking about what I know....

STERN: Do you have any recollections of that campaign?

BATSON: Yes, I do.

STERN: His opponent criticized, Vincent Celeste [Vincent J. Celeste], criticized him for his vote on the civil rights bills.

BATSON: Yes, and that was used. But I don't think Celeste was too interested in civil rights, but it was used. But, Marjorie Lawson decided to mend some fences, and so she called me. We sat down and she talked, and she asked me how I felt about Senator Kennedy. I told her just how I felt. I said that I was going to vote for him, but I would not campaign, that this was kind of a personal thing with me because I

had gone out and in a sense had been his spokesperson and said, "No, Kennedy has said this is the way it will be done." And I felt that if he had changed his mind about his action on the civil rights bill that the least he could have done was to have let me know. And, so I felt personally violated by what he had done.

STERN: You didn't feel that the follow-up letters were an adequate explanation.

BATSON: No, no, because I felt that should have been admitted before the fact and not after the fact. So, Marjorie asked me to, not to hold it against him, that he was going to run for president. And I said, Well, I thought he was a good person, and that overall that he was good. I didn't think he was evil and he certainly was the better candidate of those running at that time, and I was going to vote for him. But something very interesting came up. The Senator was going to have a meeting in the South End, at the Professional and Businessmen's Club--a club that was established by a black group. It is located on Mass. Avenue [Massachusetts Avenue]--and I can't remember, I think it was Sorensen who called me up and said to me that the Senator wanted to meet with me.

STERN: This is '58?

BATSON: This was '58. And, he wanted to meet with me before that meeting.

[-6-]

STERN: I see.

BATSON: The meeting was going to be on a Sunday afternoon. So he asked, would I be willing to meet with him in a private meeting? So I said, "Sure." So he asked, "Would I come down to the Senator's apartment?" You know, he had an apartment on Bowdoin Street, right across from the State House. So, I went down that Sunday to meet with him. It was a hot day. It was in the summer, but I don't have any recollection of what timing it was except it was very hot. And, I went up into the apartment and sat down. And he said, "Ruth, you know, this afternoon I'm meeting with the Negro community, and I don't want an open confrontation with you at this meeting. And what I would like to do is to see if we could..." I'm trying to remember as clearly as I can what he said, but in other words, let's have our fight now, and not later.

STERN: Privately instead of publicly.

BATSON: Privately and not publicly. So, I said, "Senator, my wish is not to fight with you publicly." And I explained just as I have explained to you, that I was disappointed and that it was all over now, and that I didn't think that he was a bad person. But I did take very seriously my word, and I hoped other people did. And that was the thing that had bothered me more than the vote.

STERN: I see.

BATSON: And, that I certainly had no intention of carrying this out any further in a public debate. And that he could come to.... He asked me was I going to come to the meeting and I said, Yes, I was. And he said he could come to the meeting with full assurance that I was not going to raise the issue at the meeting. Isn't that interesting?

STERN: Very interesting.

BATSON: Yes, I thought so.

STERN: I'm curious to hear if you have any response. Herbert Tucker said that after the '57 vote...

BATSON: Yes.

STERN: ...and from '57 to '60, he said that there was, and I'm quoting him now, the exact words, he said that there was distrust of Kennedy in the black community...

BATSON: Absolutely.

STERN: ...and that it grew to enormous proportions in later years. And by that he means up to, at least up to the point where he was elected president. Did you feel that that was the case?

[-7-]

BATSON: I never felt that it was enormous proportions but there was distrust. I felt it more when I went outside of this Boston community. You see, no matter what you say, the people who live in this area are Kennedy people. We're going through the same thing with the Ted Kennedy thing and the Brooke [Edward W. Brooke] thing. And, people mad as hell at Ted Kennedy. I for one and a lot of other people. But somehow this Kennedy magic, that still softens the issue for them. I don't know what it is or what it was, and that was the same thing I felt at that time. That as mad as people were about what Jack Kennedy had done on that vote, because we didn't think that he had to do it, and more importantly, we felt that it was a political ploy.

STERN: I think the evidence shows it was.

BATSON: And the evidence shows that it was.

STERN: He was trying to not alienate blacks nor the southerners. He was trying to balance....

BATSON: Yes, and we felt that we were expendable at that time, that he made a choice and would let the blacks go. And, so people were very worried. But somehow it was clear that he was going to become a candidate for president. The glow came on and on and on and on. You just got caught up in the magic of the Kennedys.

STERN: So, how did the meeting go that afternoon?

BATSON: So, the meeting was well attended and I sat there silent. I didn't say anything. I didn't ask any questions, which in itself caused everybody to wonder why. [Laughter] As I remember it was a good enough meeting, kind of bland, nothing important. I can remember hearing Eddie McCormack say about Jack Kennedy after he had made a speech, "Can you imagine what would have happened to me if I'd made a speech like that?" He could say nothing and get the best response. By that, I mean he was a good speaker, he had used words beautifully, but the substance wasn't always that great. And, that's the way I felt about what he did that afternoon. But people responded, and as he was leaving he came over to me and said, "Ruth, thank you very much for coming to the meeting." Well, I thought that was one of the most interesting encounters that I had with Jack Kennedy.

STERN: That is very interesting.

BATSON: Yes.

STERN: Do you have any role at all in that campaign against Celeste?

BATSON: Not, not at all. I mean I voted for him. I met with Marjorie Lawson. I knew he was going to win. I think if I thought there was any danger that Celeste would win I thought he was a very inferior candidate

[-8-]

and certainly had no interest in the kind of things I was interested in, I would have rallied myself and gotten involved. I had no role nor was I asked to have any real role in anything.

STERN: Did you have any contacts between '58 and the beginning of the campaign for president?

BATSON: All right. Now, when he was going to run for president... By this time Marjorie Lawson and I had become very good friends, we just liked each other. And she called me up one day when the convention [Democratic National Convention] was supposed to be held in Los Angeles...

STERN: Right.

BATSON: ...and she said, "Ruth, how would you like to come to the convention?" I said, "To do what?" She said, "To work in the civil rights office at the convention." I said, "Marjorie, you know, I haven't been that in with the Kennedys." She said, "Well, I'm in," and she said, "I'd like you to come out and talk with people and work in the civil rights office out there." I said, "Marjorie, I would love nothing better," I said, "Where else would I get a chance to be involved in a campaign like that." So, I did go, as Margie's assistant to the Los Angeles convention. And, it was one of the most exciting events in my life. It was like going to college.

STERN: Oh, let's talk about it.

BATSON: Okay.

STERN: You weren't a delegate?

BATSON: No, I was not a delegate. They had different offices and the office that I worked with was what was called the civil rights office. And Herbie Tucker worked out of that office. Virginia Battle, have you talked to her at all? She lives in Washington. [Washington, D.C.]

STERN: She's been interviewed, I think.

BATSON: Yes. Virginia Battle at that time had been a Kennedy Secretary. She came up to the convention and we all worked together. Black people would come in to the room, and they would ask about different pieces of literature. And, we would discuss issues with them.

STERN: But you were clearly working for Kennedy...

BATSON: We were. Oh, no. This was a Kennedy....

STERN: ...as opposed to the other candidates

[-9 -]

BATSON: No, this was a Kennedy office.

STERN: I see, okay.

BATSON: After the Kennedy nomination we were all waiting to see who Kennedy would select as the vice president.

STERN: Let me be.... Before we get at that, let me ask you one question. Did the, did you have any role at all in working on the civil rights plank which was a very strong one?

BATSON: They would bring down ideas and toss them off, and we would respond. And I have a very interesting thing to say about that. We, at one point, felt that the Kennedy office was not being as strong as it could be on the whole civil rights issue. And so a meeting was arranged with Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] to discuss this with him. And, I'll never forget this one either. He came in and he said, "Listen," as tough as he could say it, "there are more issues to discuss around here than civil rights, and don't forget it." And, I mean he said it in just that kind of tone. And, I said to myself, "What am I doing here?" you know, "What's this, the same old, same old..." "What's happening here?" And, I said to Margie, who was a much more practical person.... I was and still am, I guess, too idealistic for politics; I guess that's why I'm not really in it. And we sat down afterwards and she said, "Well, you know, he's got to win," you know. "And then after you win you can do the things." But that's what he said. So, I was kind of surprised to see the kind of things that have been said about him afterwards. I didn't know him very much at that time. I had seen Bobby Kennedy around campaign offices. I didn't know him as well as I knew the President. So, I was kind of surprised myself when the plank came out as strongly as it did.

STERN: Apparently Senator Kennedy was not that pleased with the plank because he thought it promised too much, and he was worried about it.

BATSON: That's right. Yes. There was a lot.... Do you remember, do you know the name Harris Wofford [Harris L. Wofford, Jr.]?

STERN: Wofford, Harris Wofford.

BATSON: Wofford, Wofford. Well he was in charge, he was in that office too. And, he was the great smoother-outer of everybody and the see-all, know-all and everything. Well, all right. So, now we're all waiting to hear what Kennedy is going to do about the vice president.

STERN: He's nominated.

BATSON: He's nominated rather. So, now, who is going to be the vice president? And, I've forgotten who, what names.... I think even Humphrey's name...

STERN: Was one.

[-10-]

BATSON: ...was the one that people like me were supporting, and everybody was saying, "Oh, no, he can't be it." And, I've forgotten the other name that was being thrown around.

STERN: Symington [W. Stuart Symington] was one.

BATSON: Yeah.

STERN: Senator Symington.

BATSON: Symington, yeah. And, Symington was the one that seemed to me that most people in that office were gravitating to. And, then I was in the office, and I was doing some telephoning. And, Harris Wofford was on the other line, and he hung up the phone and he said, "Well, the vice president is going to be Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson]." And, I said, "Lyndon Johnson! How could they do it, another betrayal," blah, blah, blah, blah. And the whole place was silent; everybody went dead.

STERN: Wow.

BATSON: It was just dead. Everybody sat there like, how could he have done this to us? How are we going to explain this? What's going to happen? Everybody was upset. Then, of course, here came the smoothing-out again, "Well," you know, "you've got to appeal to the South, and you've got to do this..." But, I, I just couldn't be smoothed. To me, this was the complete betrayal. And, you know, it was just more of the same. And somebody called up on the phone, and I remember Harris, Harris Wofford saying, "Well, people were disappointed but they're beginning to understand that this could be all right. One person is very upset; Ruth Batson's very upset about it." So, he started getting all of the black delegates at that time, they were Negro delegates--coming in and.... "What the hell is going on here?" "What happened?" "How did this happen?"

STERN: Right, sure.

BATSON: And so, it was decided that they would have a luncheon meeting with Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. And, at that point, they would introduce Lyndon Johnson to the black delegates, and present him--that he was not an ogre, you know, that he was just a person. And, they each got busy getting in touch with all of the black delegates, and we had this luncheon. As Lyndon Johnson came in he walked around and shook hands with everybody. A handsome man. I was amazed at how good looking he was in person, you know.

STERN: Very tall.

BATSON: Yes. He was just a good looking man. And, the thing that I remember the most at that luncheon was that Kennedy introduced him, and said all the things they were going to do, and the civil rights plank. It was just a beautiful speech. And, then Lyndon Johnson got up and he said,

“There's an old Baptist prayer, a hymn, ‘Where He Leads Me, I will follow.’” And, he said, “Where he leads me,” pointing to Kennedy, “I will follow.” The room erupted. I said to myself, “Gee.” He was a real charmer. And that was how that went.

STERN: Isn't that fascinating?

BATSON: Yes. And then of course, we all got on the plane with Kennedy and came back to Boston. That was another very exciting thing, coming into Logan [Logan Airport]; the place was jammed.

STERN: Did you talk to him at all on the plane?

BATSON: No, not really. You know, he was a very--I always found him to be a very distant kind of man. I didn't see that he was that close to people at all. You know, he came by and he shook hands, he talked to everybody, said hello and everything. But, to sit down and have a conversation with him.... That's why I found that time when I went to see him very interesting because I never saw him that relaxed with people, maybe he was with people who he felt comfortable with, I don't know. I didn't know him in that way. But, he went through the plane, shook everybody's hand and talked to everybody. And, he got off the plane, and that was that.

I would have liked to have been more involved in the campaign just because I would have thought it was an interesting thing. But, I never was asked to do, to do anything. Marjorie Lawson did call me once and asked me to go to Canton, Ohio and speak in behalf of the candidate. And, I did that. Other than that I didn't....

STERN: Why Canton, Ohio? What was the, what kind of a meeting?

BATSON: It was a black women's group who had written to the President to come. And, it was a very nice group of women, and they were very pleased to have someone who came from Boston. Like you lived, to hear them talk, next door to the President. He lived at Cape Cod, and my God, you know, Hyannis was right next door to Roxbury. They were very pleased to have somebody come. Evidently it was a very political group, and I had a good time. It was very interesting.

STERN: What about this state coordinator that Chapin [Arthur A. Chapin] mentions?

BATSON: You know, I don't....

STERN: He had you down as a state coordinator.

BATSON: I don't remember it. I don't remember it. I know that I was on a committee, but we never did anything. Do you understand what I mean?

STERN: Yeah, yeah.

BATSON: That you were on these committees, but I never thought that I was used in any way. A lot of that stuff was just paper stuff. For example, I know there's an article that I cut out--somebody had sent me that's in my scrapbook--where Kennedy talks about, in the black press, about his black friends or his Negro friends and Herbie Tucker and me, and, that kind of political stuff.

STERN: Yeah.

BATSON: But, I didn't feel very well used and would have liked to have been. But, by that time, you know, it is big business now. You have a presidential campaign, the little fish are out of it. The big people are involved in it. And, I didn't feel as if I was in that category.

STERN: You didn't have any work, for example, in voter registration? Anything?

BATSON: Well, I always did that kind of thing as part of the NAACP.

STERN: I see.

BATSON: I always did that. And I was very active in voter registration. Chapin might have meant something like that; I was very active in voter registration. But, I would have done that anyhow regardless of who was a candidate. And, I was a very active Democrat. And at that time, I was very involved with the Democratic party. So, that brought us through the election.

STERN: Did you have any contacts at all in the period after the election up to the inauguration?

BATSON: No, not at all. In fact, I never saw Jack Kennedy after that.

STERN: In person?

BATSON: In person. I mean you just don't do....

STERN: I saw an inaugural... [Interruption]

BATSON: ...got an invitation to all of the little private things and everything. And I saw Kennedy from afar, you know, and so forth. But in those things there are always crushes and so forth, but I had a wonderful time. It was a great experience...

STERN: In spite of the snowstorm.

BATSON: ...in spite of the snowstorm. There was a terrible snowstorm, I'll never forget that. Going the day before to one of the festivities, and getting caught in a truck. We had jumped on somebody's truck and got caught in the storm.

[-13-]

But, the next thing that happened with Kennedy that really I think sealed my separation from the Kennedy family, was again, when Eddie McCormack decided to....

STERN: The '62 race.

BATSON: The '62 race.

STERN: Will you talk about that?

BATSON: Yes. Eddie McCormack was running for senator and, of course, Ted Kennedy decided to run for senator. And, I felt that I should support Eddie McCormack. I liked him. I felt that he should be elected. And, I didn't feel that I should support Ted Kennedy just because he was the President's brother. There was, for example, there was a man I knew very well who was actually called by the President. And this guy had been really helped by the McCormacks. I knew this personally. He was a fellow who had been very sick, and he had been helped with jobs and everything. And, I said, "How can you, how can you do this," you know, "How can you do this to Eddie McCormack?" He said, "Ruth, the President called me."

As you've gone along have you heard about Franklin Holgate [Franklin W. Holgate], who has been a representative, a state representative?

STERN: No, that's not familiar to me.

BATSON: Well, he has died since, and he got very close to Ted Kennedy. And, he had called me, and he had asked me to come and talk to Ted Kennedy. And, I said, "Frank, I'll be glad to talk to him, but you know I'm supporting Eddie McCormack." He said, "I don't mind, Ruth," he said, "but I just would like for you to talk with him. Would you come and talk to him?" Well, we made a date, and through some mixup I had the wrong date and so I didn't get to talk with him which I think he felt was deliberate. And then, to add icing to the cake, Eddie McCormack asked me to make one of the seconding speeches at the convention, which I did. [Laughter]

STERN: As I recall, Kennedy won the nomination at the convention...

BATSON: Kennedy won the nomination.

STERN: ...and McCormack then challenged him in the primary?

BATSON: Oh, yes.

STERN: And Kennedy won the primary?

BATSON: Oh, yes. It was just a washout. I just thought it was.... I mean Ted Kennedy has a right to run, but you know, it was just such an uneven contest.

[-14-]

STERN: Did you have any part at all in the '68, Robert Kennedy's '68 campaign?

BATSON: No, none whatsoever. No, none whatsoever.

STERN: As regional president, were you, of the NAACP...

BATSON: Yes, yes.

STERN: ...what was the organization's response to Kennedy's performance in civil rights?

BATSON: Extremely negative. Extremely negative. And, as I said the further you went out of the state.... While you were in Massachusetts, there were always these apologies, these excuses for what had happened and the fact that you have to be political; that you've got to get in first and you've got to do things. But, this was not accepted by people outside of Massachusetts. The response was extremely negative. And, people felt that Kennedy, that civil rights was not one of Kennedy's high points.

However, you know, in his message to Congress on the civil rights act, his message was pretty strong. And, I felt that there was starting to be a little softening there. But, you see, Kennedy never had a chance to show his stuff.

STERN: Did you feel that some of the specific issues like the business about Meredith [James Howard Meredith] at the University of Mississippi, and the Freedom Riders, and Birmingham [Alabama], and well others...

BATSON: Well, I think the, when he...

STERN: ...did you feel he was moving in the direction of a stronger....

BATSON: I think that he certainly had good instincts. He knew what to do, and he knew how to do it with class. For example, the business with Martin Luther King [Martin Luther King, Jr.]...

STERN: With the telephone call?

BATSON: ...with the telephone call, was something that softened your heart, and delighted you. But, there was always this feeling that he was, that the civil

rights issue was expendable. Now, what you learn as you grow older is that the civil rights is *not* the dominant issue with any politician. Even Hubert Humphrey resorted to compromise at times and he certainly was a champion of human rights. We, the people, are always being asked to accept the compromise position. I believe that there has to be a cadre of people who just won't accept that from their leaders, from their political leaders. Because what I find is that the more you accept from

[-15-]

political leaders the more they ask you to accept.

STERN: You, or in terms of your own feelings or the organization's feelings then felt that, for example, even up until the civil rights speech of June '63, that he was not performing well in civil rights?

BATSON: That's right. I just felt that he was not giving it his all. He was not giving to it what you would expect a man from Boston with the abolitionist background, the freedom background. In addition to that, remember in 1963 all hell broke loose in Boston. Now Kennedy was assassinated in November. Right?

STERN: Right.

BATSON: In June--I was chairman of the NAACP's education committee--we went before the Boston School Committee on the desegregation issue. I don't know how much you know about it, but...

STERN: I am....

BATSON: ...that was the beginning of the whole desegregation problem here in Boston. And, we went before the Boston School Committee and presented them with fourteen points. Everything broke loose. I wrote Kennedy a letter asking him for a statement on integrated education. I never heard from him. He did come out with a statement about integrated education, but he did not directly answer the NAACP.... I wrote him on behalf of the Boston branch. I didn't write him on...

STERN: I see, I see.

BATSON: ...behalf of myself. I don't know if that was ever found in his files or not. But, he never answered it you see. We felt a statement from him to the people of Boston would have been very helpful. And, if I ever find it--I have it, I'll send it to you.

STERN: Yeah. Of course, he did give the civil rights address in June which was generally regarded, I think by.... I know Roy Wilkins thought...

BATSON: It was an excellent speech.

STERN: ...it was an excellent speech.

BATSON: Excellent, it was an excellent speech. And, as I say that was the beginning of people's feeling that maybe he was going to really do something.

STERN: And, of course, the civil rights bill was an...

BATSON: An excellent...

[-16-]

STERN: ...a substantial bill.

BATSON: Yes, it was a substantial bill. And, it was his bill. Lyndon Johnson, you know, carried it out, but it was his bill.

STERN: Right. There's a certain irony, of course, that Johnson ended up doing so many of these things.

BATSON: I know it, I know it, I know it, I know.

STERN: In terms of your feelings about him in 1960.

BATSON: Yes. Isn't it? I know it, I know. I wish you could have been in that room and seen that gloom that went over that room that day, when it was announced that Lyndon Johnson was going to be the vice president. And when I came home, you would've thought that I was one of the ones that selected him, you know. "You were there and this happened?" It was....

STERN: I'm just curious. Did you and did the people in the NAACP, black people in general, up here in Boston, still feel that way at the time of the assassination that Johnson was someone you didn't want? Or had your feelings toward him changed by then?

BATSON: No, I think, I don't think that. I think by that time.... There was expressed the feelings that people have a way of rising to the occasion, or that he was unacceptable. But, there wasn't any middle ground about him. I think people were too overwhelmed by what had happened.

STERN: So, there was more attention to what had happened...

BATSON: Right.

STERN: ...to Kennedy then.

BATSON: Right, what had happened. And, not too much about what Johnson had done, yes.

STERN: I know that there's a new book out on Kennedy and civil rights. You might be interested. I don't know if you know Carl Brauer [Carl M. Brauer].

BATSON: Oh yes, did he write one?

STERN: JFK and the Second Reconstruction [*John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction*] in which he, he has some very interesting evidence about many black people all over the country feeling just this tremendous sense of gloom. In that they just didn't trust Johnson, and they just didn't know what to expect from Johnson.

[-17-]

BATSON: Well, I think it was the fact that he was a southerner. And you know, we all went through this period where you just did not trust southerners, southern whites. You know, I went through a time when I would hear a white person with a southern accent and that was enough to, to turn me off. And, I think Johnson suffered from that. I don't remember having any feelings about Lyndon Johnson taking over or not taking over or what he was going to do, what he was going to do.

STERN: Did you have any part at all in the '64 campaign with his people?

BATSON: In the '64 campaign, I was a delegate.

STERN: Ahh, so you went to the convention?

BATSON: I went to the convention and it was very interesting how I became a delegate. In Massachusetts at that time, they appointed delegates.

STERN: Who's they? The ah...

BATSON: I mean the political people.

STERN: Yeah. Right.

BATSON: Like, if you were senator, you could appoint a delegate. And, you had this system where they would appoint like a half of a delegate and a quarter of a delegate and a fifth....

And I got a call from Speaker of the House McCormack [John William McCormack], the Speaker at that time. And he said, "Ruth, I would like you to be a half a delegate at the convention." I said, "Really?" He said, "The McCormacks never forget."

STERN: Isn't that fascinating?

BATSON: And he said, "I remember that you stood up for Eddie when very few people would, and this is one way of saying that I appreciate it." Now, isn't that interesting?

STERN: Yes, it is.

BATSON: And I was the only black delegate who was sent from Massachusetts....

STERN: As late as '64?

BATSON: As late as '64.

STERN: That surprises me.

BATSON: There were alternates, but I was the only black delegate. Now, this was a fascinating convention, because that's where the Mississippi

[-18-]

freedom [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party] emerged.

STERN: That's right. Aaron Henry [Aaron E. Henry] was it?

BATSON: I went down there and immediately go all embroiled with the Freedom party. We had a hearing here in Boston on the Mississippi Freedom fight. However, nothing was accomplished.

STERN: Wasn't there some kind of a compromise that was worked out?

BATSON: Yes, but I voted against it, and like did.... It was really a fascinating convention. We used to give our badges to members of the Freedom Party. At night they would come around and pick up these passes and they'd go in and vote the next day. Then they would bring them back to you. It was a very interesting system, worked out for getting in and out of the convention.

STERN: Were you pleased at Humphrey's selection for vice president at that point?

BATSON: Yes I was. You know, I liked Humphrey and I was happy he was at least selected. And, then I was a delegate to the 1968 convention in....

STERN: Oh, in Chicago. You were in Chicago.

BATSON: No, no, not in Chicago. I mean 19.... The one in Miami. That was 1968, wasn't it?

STERN: Now wait, I'm beginning to feel.... Who was nominated?

BATSON: McGovern [George S. McGovern].

STERN: Oh, '72.

BATSON: Seventy-two convention, that's right. And that's been about the end of my....

STERN: Can you recall, were you present in '64 when they showed about that film about JFK and Bobby Kennedy was up on the...?

BATSON: Yes, yes, yes.

STERN: Can you respond to it personally?

BATSON: Well, you know, I was just, I was in the hall of course. And, it was just big long commotion. I'm going to answer your question, but just as I remember things I have to say it. The things I remember the most about that convention is they had a reception for Jackie Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]. And, I remember being so interested in seeing

[-19-]

her. I had met her once before at a tea, when she was the Senator's wife, and now she was the assassinated President's widow. We stood in these long lines and these lines winded by, and I felt so interested and so anxious to see her. I moved up to the woman and didn't realize I was shaking hands with her until I got by her.

STERN: Isn't that fascinating.

BATSON: And then, when I got by her, I realize that that was Jackie Kennedy. That's what I remember most about the Kennedys in that convention. I remember the showing of the film and people crying and the sadness all around. And some people saying that it was, that they shouldn't have shown the film and that it, that it had, you know, kind of put a lid on the convention.

STERN: Falling.

BATSON: Yes. They said that Johnson shouldn't have had to bear that, and that kind of

thing, but....

STERN: It's very interesting, you know, that he postponed it until after the vice presidential...

BATSON: That's right.

STERN: ...nomination because of the fear that it would stampede the convention to nominate Bobby Kennedy for vice president.

BATSON: Yes, that's right. Well, I think that that's what would have happened. I would have preferred Humphrey myself just because I felt.... I remembered Bobby Kennedy at the room there, saying that, that just don't think that civil rights.... You see, I have, I have had a single mindedness of purpose when it comes to civil rights issues. And, I just think that anybody that has an issue has to do that. And, the other people that respond, have to respond in their way.

STERN: That's fascinating. Do you have anything else to add about that you can recall?

BATSON: I really can't at this moment. Just let me look through this book and see if it brings back some things.

STERN: All right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-20-]

Ruth M. Batson Oral History Transcript
Name Index

B

Battle, Virginia, 9
Brauer, Carl M., 17
Brooke, Edward W., 8
Burke, William H., Jr., 2, 3, 4

C

Celeste, Vincent J., 6, 8
Chapin, Arthur A., 12, 13

D

Douglas, Paul H., 4

H

Henry, Aaron E., 19
Holgate, Franklin W., 14
Humphrey, Hubert H., 4, 10, 15, 19, 20

J

Johnson, Lyndon Baines, 11, 17, 18, 20

K

Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 19, 20
Kennedy, Edward Moore, 1, 8, 14
Kennedy, John F., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11,
12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20
Kennedy, Mary, 3

Kennedy, Robert F., 10, 15, 19, 20
King, Martin Luther, Jr., 15

L

Lawson, Belford V., 6
Lawson, Marjorie McKenzie, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12
Lodge, Henry Cabot, 1
Lynch, John M. "Pat", 2, 3

M

McCormack, Edward J., Jr., 2, 3, 8, 14, 18
McCormack, John William, 18
McGovern, George S., 19
Meredith, James Howard, 15

S

Shriver, Eunice Kennedy, 1, 2
Silva, Harry L., 2
Sorensen, Theodore C., 5, 6
Symington, W. Stuart, 11

T

Tucker, Herbert E., Jr., 3, 7, 9, 13

W

Wilkins, 16
Wofford, Harris L., Jr., 10, 11