

Preston Bruce, Oral History Interview – 6/16/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Bruce, White House doorman from 1952 until 1977, discusses his job responsibilities, observations of John F. Kennedy's (JFK) affectionate interactions with his children, and the White House in the aftermath of JFK's assassination, among other issues.

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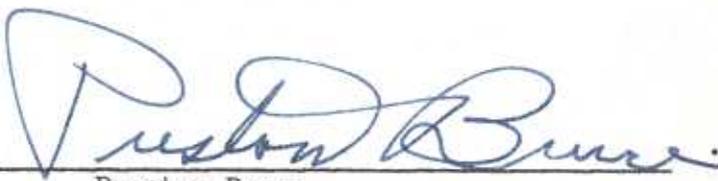
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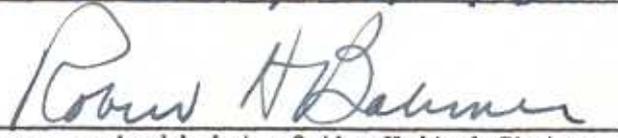
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Preston Bruce

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Oral History Interview

with

Preston Bruce

June 16, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Nancy Tuckerman and Pamela Turnure

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TUCKERMAN: This is an interview with Preston Bruce who is the White House butler. Would that be your exact title?

BRUCE: No, I'm the doorman.

TUCKERMAN: White House doorman. And how long have you been in the White House?

BRUCE: On November 15, (1964) it will be twelve years.

TUCKERMAN: Twelve years. So you've seen many changes and several administrations. Can you recall the first time you met the President and Mrs. Kennedy [John F. Kennedy; Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]?

BRUCE: Yes, I can. That's one of the things I've always marveled about and I've told a lot of people. I was wondering what kind of

mind he had to remember so clearly right straight through. It was on the morning of his inauguration. He came to the White House to ride with President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] to the Capitol for the inauguration ceremonies. Upon his return, he went to the reviewing stand to watch the parade. I took some blankets to keep them warm. Mrs. Kennedy accepted hers, but he refused one. On their return to the mansion after the long parade, they had dinner and a short rest before starting the evening activities. The evening they came up from Pennsylvania Avenue, after the parade and all, I took them to the second floor to the living quarters and he asked me my name, and introduced me to Mrs. Kennedy. And he never forgot my name and he always called me by my name. I think that is one of the happiest things any employee, working for great people, can have—to know that they remember them. And both of them, the President and Mrs. Kennedy always remembered my name.

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That night I had the pleasure of bringing them down on the elevators, and escorting them to their car. They were a very handsome couple as they departed for the various inaugural balls. I waited for them until they returned from a very triumphant evening about two o'clock and took them upstairs.

TURNURE: Did you see the President quite often, going through the halls and upstairs?

BRUCE: Well, actually that's my job, you know, to always wait on him and bring him down from his office duties and to meet him and bring him back home again. I watched him day by day as he took over the presidential duties. It was always a thrill to wait for him in the evening, when he returned from his office, to go upstairs to the family living quarters. He was never too busy to say, "Hello, Bruce." I always looked forward to this familiar greeting. This was repeated daily. I looked forward to that, seeing him both going out and coming in. During his

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leisure moments of relaxation in the evenings, there were many occasions when I accompanied the President and First Lady to the movies shown in the White House theatre.

Of course, on the trips away, that was something else. That was always interesting too—to see them leave on their trips, actually dreading to see them go for many reasons that went through our minds, but when we knew that they were about to come back, we'd start to wait for them. They were the happy moments, really.

TURNURE: And they were glad to see you?

BRUCE: Yes, always. The President and Mrs. Kennedy would come in. Usually I'm right there to meet them, especially at night. They would always

shake hands with me and let me know that they were glad to be back home. The President would always ask me if everything had run to suit me. And he'd always say to many people, in talking to them, "Bruce, he runs the place." There are so many things

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that I can remember. President Kennedy made me feel that I was a part of the family.

I remember my son [Preston Bruce, Jr.] had just been appointed principal of a school in Vermont at the age of 24, which is pretty young for a principal. And I told him about it and he asked me to have him to come in to talk with him. He wanted to meet him. I brought him in at 12 o'clock and he stopped in the middle of some of his busy schedule and chatted with my son and a fellow teacher, a young man who taught with my son. He chatted with them for more than 25 minutes and that's something my son will never forget; neither will this young man.

TURNURE: Was he very interested in what your son was doing?

BRUCE: Yes.

TURNURE: Did he ask a lot of questions?

BRUCE: Yes, quite interested. As a matter of fact, he wanted to know how my son migrated so far off in that area in the first place to

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attend school. And of course, I went through all the process—I won't go through it here—to tell him how he got there. But I will say this, actually how he first got there, I won't go through everything, but Dr. Phillip D. Nolle was completing his doctorate at Springfield College. That's a college for athletes. My son thought he wanted to go into physical education. So my son told him that he'd have to ask me, so he made a long distance call from Springfield here. He was doing a refresher course there in the summer. So he called and I said "Well, if you think you'd like it, it would be all right to make the change." So I talked with Dr. Nolle also. He said he'd like to have him. So right away they sent in for his transcript to be transferred from Springfield to Lyndon College, Lyndonville, Vermont. So

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on September 5, my son began classes there. He had four of the most marvelous years of his life and they liked him there very much. He was the only Negro there for three years at the time and was elected President of the freshman class that year. Of course I told the President all of this and he was very interested; and in the meantime, of course, my chest was pretty far out.

TURNURE: I would think so.

BRUCE: Then two years later, with the effort of grinding and straining and talking and trying to show the people of Readsboro, Vermont that they were in need of a good school with modern facilities for the students that they had there, my son was able to convince the people of Readsboro to build a new school. Well, I believe it was in June of '62 that they had the dedication of the new school, a \$275,000 school, and turned over to him, after the dedication, the keys to that school, in which he was so

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much a part of getting it built.

Present Kennedy sent a full telegram, a letter, congratulating him on the wonderful achievement that he had been so much a part of helping the people of that community achieve. They read that too. Dr. Holden [Arthur John Holden, Jr.], the Commissioner of Education for Vermont, read the telegram the Sunday that it had arrived.

TURNURE: That showed how interested he really was in your son.

BRUCE: Yes, and he also read a telegram from President Eisenhower congratulating him. So those were some marvelous and memorable moments that we had, and of course, there were other little moments that I can remember.

TURNURE: Did you ever spend much time with the children [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy; John F. Kennedy, Jr.]?

BRUCE: That's what I'd like to talk about really, because I was so fond of the children; both of them, and Mrs. Kennedy. I could talk at length about what a devoted father President

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Kennedy was to his children. He was also a grand husband to a beautiful, gracious lady, Mrs. Kennedy.

I was always on hand; I always feared that she that she probably wouldn't want me around a good many times, when she was coming with the children, because I think she liked to have them alone but she never could say anything because they were fond of me, both of them. I would always be as near as possible to see the President taking so much time with Caroline and many times I've seen him on all fours, going through the hall with John-John and Caroline. I remember once, he went through the hall and hit his head on the desk. I was there. I made a quick retreat out of sight.

TURNURE: He really enjoyed playing with the children?

BRUCE: Oh, yes.

TURNURE: He was a good father to them?

BRUCE: He was—marvelous. I just wish I could have been the father to my children that he

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was. I vividly recall the extreme pleasure the President derived as he watched the “Royal Highland Black Watch Regiment” as they performed for 17,000 children on the south lawn of the White House on November 13, 1963. His eyes sparkled. He loved children and thrilled both the children and adults as he went through the crowd shaking hands. I was brisk and cool that evening as I waited on the balcony with his overcoat with Mrs. Kennedy, the children, and guests. When he arrived, I said, “Mr. President, would you like your overcoat now?” He replied, “No, you put it on.” I promptly put it around my shoulders because I was cold. He sat there for about an hour with John-John and Caroline crawling all over him. At one point little John had his legs laced around his daddy’s neck. I was so engrossed with the antics of the children that I missed some of the marvelous performances of the “Black Watch.” Being poor and not having

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any money, I had to work quite a lot. He had worked too, of course, you know. But he certainly took time out to have fun with two very wonderful children, Caroline and John-John.

TURNURE: And you felt that the children really loved to be with him also?

BRUCE: Oh my, I should say. They adored both of them, Mother and Dad.

TURNURE: Would they ride down to work with him in the morning?

BRUCE: Yes, little John-John would come down and it was always rather comical when John-John would holler to his dad, “Don’t leave me,” he said. “We’ve got to go to work.” The President would call back and tell him, “Come on, let’s go to work.” And John-John would come down in his pajamas and bathrobe and of course, I’d come out to the door. Maybe, I have followed them to the office, to bring him back. That was a lot of fun too.

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TURNURE: And they’d talk on the way to the office?

BRUCE: Yes, just like two adults. Caroline, of course, was pretty grown up. She

was quite interested in talking with her father and he would listen. He had to give her answers too.

TURNURE: Did he ever go upstairs to her school which you can remember?

BRUCE: Oh, yes, he'd go up to the classes perhaps once or twice a week, I'd say. I have taken him up and waited for him while he'd go up and shake hands with the children and talk with them. Often they'd see the President, the other children. I think President Kennedy took part in almost everything the children participated in and I'm sure Mrs. Kennedy—I just don't see how she put in so much time with the children, having so much to do for herself, you know.

TURNURE: And then you were on duty in the evenings with the state dinners?

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BRUCE: Yes. Due to my working hours, which are from three o'clock until the President and the First Lady retire for the night, I was able to share many memorable events such as the colorful and interesting state dinners and receptions for visiting heads of state.

I usually brought the President and Mrs. Kennedy down to meet their honored guests, and took them back to the second floor for conversation and an exchange of gifts. I would then alert the Usher's Office to notify them that the President, First Lady, and honored guests were on their way down the grand stairway to the first floor of the mansion to start the festivities of the evening.

The President and Mrs. Kennedy always accompanied their guests to the door for their departure to the presidential guest house. I then took the President and First Lady back upstairs, and the President always

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thanked me for my services performed during that evening and wished me a good night. This custom prevailed during his years at the White House.

But when they were at home, they would live like any other American family. I think that's why we were so close to him; the boy that worked evenings with me and myself. I think that's one of the reason why they knew us so well.

TURNURE: Because you were a part of their household?

BRUCE: Yes. I could go right in. Or many times, the President would call me after he had retired for bed, to come up and bring him various things; coca cola, for instance, or to get him a paper of some kind; they were things that I was delighted to be helpful with. So you see, I had a deep and close feeling for the President, Mrs. Kennedy and the children during the short time they were with us.

The evening they departed for Texas,

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for some unknown reason, I felt sad and hated to see them go. As he left he turned to me and said, "Bruce, take care, and look after the White House." That was our favorite joke.

TURNURE: Could you tell us where you were at the time of the President's assassination?

BRUCE: Yes, I was sitting at the dinner table about to eat lunch with my wife [Virginia Bruce], which I usually do every day before coming here, and I'm a great lover of music and the minute I come in the house from outside I usually flip on the radio. And this day I came in and the radio was playing and all of a sudden there came a sudden halt, and the announcer said, "Bulletin," in just that manner, he said, "The President has been shot." I jumped up out of my chair and I came up under the table, and I knocked all the dishes off the table because I knew that just had to be a joke. And there was a long pause, if I can remember correctly on the radio, and then he

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said, "The President has been shot and it has been verified that he has been shot and we don't know what condition he's in." About that time I was going out the door, with my coat on, no hat, and I can't remember anything else. The police caught me coming to work. I didn't realize how fast I was driving.

TURNURE: Were you arrested for speeding on the way?

BRUCE: He stopped me, but he let me go. I actually knew what I was doing as far as driving, but for a moment I don't know exactly; I can't answer exactly; I can't tell you just exactly what went through my mind or my feelings. I remember he stopped me just about at Columbia Road and 16th Street. He said I was doing 45 miles per hour and I certainly didn't dispute him.

TURNURE: Your instinct was to get right to the White House?

BRUCE: Yes. And when he rolled up beside me and pulled me over, the moment he stopped, and

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asked me what was the hurry, I told him immediately; I told him where I worked and immediately I showed him my pass. He said, "Oh, my God." He said, "You must be kidding" in that tone and he said, "Follow me down."

TURNURE: So he led you down...

BRUCE: He came right down, not dangerously fast, but at a clip—I think around 35 miles an hour—all the way to 16th and Lafayette Park and then he beckoned me to go that way and I came on down here and that was all in the way of arrest.

TURNURE: And when you arrived, that was then about two o'clock in the afternoon?

BRUCE: Yes, it was because I was having dinner—I guess it was before two. It must have been about 2:25 at that time because I'm sure I didn't lose over about eight or ten minutes coming down.

TURNURE: And then did you stay at the door that night, until Mrs. Kennedy came back?

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BRUCE: I didn't go home until after the funeral.

TURNURE: Is that right, really?

BRUCE: Yes. I stayed here from night time until....

TURNURE: What was the first thing that you did when you came to the White House?

BRUCE: Well, first thing, before dressing into my work attire, I ran into the Usher's Office to reverify that. And the television was on and the commentator was talking, telling what had happened. Actually, after I was positively sure just what happened, it was quite some time before I could compose myself enough to really go about my work. I started to meet people and to help as much as I could and to show the many persons that came in to aid, about the House, where they would ask to go. Later, I suppose, after I was sure that this thing had really happened, then my only next thought was to try to be there and help all I possibly could. I just helped so madly and I hated so badly to leave Mrs. Kennedy because I knew

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just exactly what she had confronting her.

TURNURE: And a lot of people came in that evening in to fix the East Room and take care of the arrangements?

BRUCE: Just loads of people came in from everywhere; people I had never

seen, actually. Mr. William Walton, a very dear friend of President and Mrs. Kennedy came in immediately afterward and took over with Mr. Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.], who is a marvelous person; they arranged things with your great help too, you know. I was here that night and you were with them. The next morning, when Mrs. Kennedy came in, another one of my most sad moments was to see her. I took her upstairs and came back downstairs and I did think I was going to go home after that, but I decided differently. The Attorney General [Robert F. Kennedy] came out and told me to go on upstairs and relax and lie down for a while. I didn't do that. I did relax, however. I went downstairs and I sat down for a while but then the things did start to

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happen after that and I just hoped that I would be able to help, which I did.

TURNURE: I'm sure you were the greatest help. You stayed every night....

BRUCE: Yes, I stayed completely through from the time I came in that Friday until after the funeral. I went home that night after the funeral. I went home that night. After the funeral that evening, I think I went home at 10 o'clock that night. The usher, Mr. West [J. Bernard West], told me to go home and stay as long as I wanted to. I think I was back the next day.

TURNURE: And then you were there to help Mrs. Kennedy get ready to move out?

BRUCE: Yes, another sad time, when she was preparing to move out of the House. I hope I was of some help getting her arranged.

TURNURE: And then she called all the staff together to say goodbye.

BRUCE: Yes, she did. It was another very sad moment in that whole affair. There again

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many of us could hardly compose ourselves. We had to say goodbye to her here, and our First Lady, for the last time. She had pictures with us.

TURNURE: And little John was there...?

BRUCE: Oh yes. Little John. I had a picture with him and Mrs. Kennedy. Caroline, I didn't get a picture with Caroline. But I still love them both very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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