

Aaron E. Henry Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 05/07/1969
Administrative Information

Creator: Aaron E. Henry
Interviewer: Dennis J. O'Brien
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Biographical Note

Henry was a civil rights activist; co-chair of the Executive Committee of the Mississippi Democratic Party; the president of the Mississippi State Conference of the NAACP from 1953 through 1993; one of the creators of the Council of Federated Organizations in 1961; one of the founders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964; and a member of the Mississippi House of Representatives from 1982 through 1996. In this interview Henry discusses meeting John F. Kennedy [JFK] and Robert F. Kennedy; discussing Mississippi and civil rights issues with President JFK; voting rights and poll taxes; the freedom rides; the murder of three young activists in Mississippi during the Freedom Summer of 1964; Mississippi politics beginning in the late fifties; white people in Mississippi; school segregation; the 1960 presidential election; and early contact with the federal government and the Justice Department in 1961, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Aaron E. Henry

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EDITED DRAFT TRANSCRIPT

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A copy of the edited draft transcript was then sent to the interviewee to make any changes or additions he or she felt were necessary. The interviewee then returned the edited draft to the Library.

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Editorial symbols used in the transcripts include:

- ⊖ remove
- = capitalize
- ∪ pull together
- / lower case
- ... trail off
- ... interruption
- ^ addition
- ⊙ period

Library staff would be happy to answer any questions you might have about this transcript.

Oral History Interview

with

AARON HENRY

May 7, 1969
Clarksdale, Mississippi

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Well, when was the first time you met
President Kennedy?

HENRY: In 1962 or 1961, you'd have to check
that out; It's the year that the
[National Association for the Advancement of
NAACP, Convention met in Washington. Colored People
I've just forgotten the exact year
but it was one of those two years. I
know he was killed the following year
in November. We had visits with him; ①

INTERVIEW: ... Ted's [THEODORE M.]

head of the Community Action ^[Program] interest in
OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity].

That's Robert Simmons there, ^{he's} his now over
at the Civil Rights Compliance. ^{Ted's for} That's

James Blake, who is ^{with} the Poverty ^{Programmer}

in New York State. This is a reporter
of an Ebony Magazine here. That's ^[Joseph A.] Bob

Brown who at that time was President of
^[NACCP] the State Conference of South Carolina, and
^[L.H.]

Mr. ^A Holdman who was President of the
State Conference of Illinois. This is

largely a State Conference of field
^{directors} electives sessions with the President
and I say, I think that it must have
been '62.

O'BRIEN: Did you have much chance to talk to him
about politics in Mississippi at that
time?

HENRY: Well, yes. The Mississippi delegation
was given private ^{audience} orient with him and

we were largely concerned with the fact that something like twelve to fifteen thousand black people withⁱⁿ the state were able to be, participate in politics. It was largely the will of the white power structure of the various communities that dictated whether or not blacks were able to participate in the political era, and we even talked about federal legislation at that time, to ~~bring this bill~~ come back) of which he was highly in favor of all along.

O'BRIEN: What kind of legislation were you talking about at that point?

HENRY: We were talking about actually what [B. JOHNSON] Lyndon finally got passed, the voter [Voting] rights act of 1965, which Kennedy was for as far back as 1962 but was not able to get it by the committee's and through congress because of the laissez-faire

affair added to. (Interruption)

O'BRIEN: Did you talk to him at that point about your own organization in Mississippi and in Mississippi politics?

HENRY: No, not in terms of a ^{shovenistic} shovenistic seance. We talked largely about the problem that was there and that denied a section of the population of the state the right to vote. We did not get into whether we were concerned with the Democratic Party, the Republican Party or any other sector of ^{shovenistic} shovenistic politics; We felt the problem was bigger than that. Whether the guy wanted to register as a Republican or as a Democrat or what ever ^{you} wanted to register as. The fact that he didn't have the right to register, and the fact that he had to pay a poll tax in order to register; the fact that he had to pay

a poll tax in order to vote, not to register but to vote, ^{and} ^{to} help pass a voter registration test that required of every guy registered to be able to interpret in ^{an} ~~the~~ section of the Constitution the State of Mississippi to the satisfaction of the circuit clerk. It wasn't a question of whether the guy was right or wrong, but that he satisfied the clerk. You didn't know what section of the Constitution you were going to get until you walked into the man's office and ^{said, "I'd} ~~set out~~ like the register." So, when you've had these kinds of obstacles to overcome, you became pretty much a victim of this structureless system ^{and} only those people that the system wanted registered, got registered, ^{you see,} ^{so} this is pretty much ^{at that time} the way it was. Of course, also ^{than} we

were complaining about the segregations that prevailed in public transportation, as you recall we were in the year of '62 or 3; We had the freedom ^{rides} riots lead by James Farmer that came into the state and, of course, we highly identified with it; and The public accommodations situations as far as hotels and restaurants were concerned, frankly, the year before must have been '62 or '61. We met in Atlanta and

Ralph Bunche who was at that time, I was Under-Secretary of the United Nations to ^{Special Political Affairs} ~~Secretary~~ ^{Doq}

Hammerstein, I believe was the key note speaker for the convention and there wasn't a hotel in town that would rent him a room. We, of course, picketed all the hotels in Atlanta and used it as a slogan that "the Vice President of the world came to Atlanta and ^{he} couldn't get a bed." These were some of the things of drama that

we used to plead a case. So we were largely concerned at the time that we met with him was with the question of the noncompliance of the school system with the 1954 School Desegregation Bill which was an echo of the Supreme Court which we felt was tantamount to law, and with the voters' registration aspect, as well as the continued dehumanization of persons who were ^{black} ^{their} abide by their constant refusal of their right to eat in restaurants, ^{to} and sleep in a bed at a hotel, or ^{either} to ^{down} use a rest room in a service station. Certainly many black people had to ^{breadth and width of the} travel throughout the state without having the opportunity to use a rest room. They'd stop at the side of the road, some highway patrolman or local policeman would arrest you for indecent →

O'BRIEN: How about Robert Kennedy, Did you meet Robert Kennedy this time?

HENRY: Let's see, no, I don't think Bobby was around at this particular time, when I first recall meeting Bobby, was in 1964. I probably had met him prior^{to} then, but the first^{serious, real} opportunity of exploration with him came as a result of the murder of the three young fellows down in Philadelphia. Of course, beside the fact that we were highly involved in this and did much of the recruiting nationwide to get the kids in. Frankly, one of the boys^[Andrew], Andy Goodman from New York, I personally brought him from his mother's house and the only night he spent alive in Mississippi was in my house, and I shipped him to Meridian the next day and then he was assigned to... Meridian was an assignment station, and he went on over to Philadelphia

Edward [unclear] and [unclear]

with [unclear] and Goodman to investigate

this burning church on the way back

they were arrested and perhaps murdered

sometime during the night. Well the

NAACP had been called into session,

and I went too. We dismissed the con-

vention and went into Washington for

a demonstration against the Justice

Department because we felt that the

FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]

was, to some degree, partially responsible for

what had happened, because once the

kids were missing, we had a twenty minute

discipline cycle; anytime you're twenty

minutes late for anything you call in.

And after the kids were late over an

half an hour and had not called in,

we called the FBI and told them what the

problem was, that three guys were missing

and we didn't know where they were, and

we asked them to call the jail between
^{Morristown} and Philadelphia to ascertain
 whether they were there or not. Well
 what they did, I really don't know, but
 the answer we got from the person we
 talked to was that the FBI did not
 have the authority to intervene, that
 we had not proven that they had been
^{carried} taken across the state line, and they
 had not been missing ²⁴ twenty-four hours,
 so therefore this was not a case that ^{the}
^{FBI} they could get into. And so we, in
 response to this, knowing that at least
 from a ricochet point of view the
 FBI is allegedly under the Justice
 Department, Of course we know that
 J. Edgar Hoover runs his own shop,
 but we went to picket, we just thought this
 an injustice.
 and Bobby who was Attorney General at
 that time came out and joined the picket
 line and walked with us.

O'BRIEN: He did?

HENRY: Yes. Just for himself. So this was really the first time that I recall at this moment, you know, meanwhile I'd have to think back more definite. ^{You hit me cold}
^{with} "how or what would be your relationship with the fellows ^{had been,} and it's the sort of thing I definitely appreciate, but it's been so casual, and to sometimes personal and the other times impersonal, that I don't remember things in sequences when ^{you're} ~~your~~ talking about people you got to know and were with fairly often.

O'BRIEN: Well, going back to that first meeting with John Kennedy, how about people around him and the White House staff? do you recall meeting any of these people?

HENRY: No. This was really him and us, ^{The} President and the NAACP, with people like

Roy Wilkins, Clarence Mitchell, Henry Moon, John Morsell really serving as ^a liaisons between him and us. It was more of a get-acquainted session than it was one of finding out what his legislative ideas and next legislative program was going to be.

O'BRIEN: Well, when you wanted to make a contact with the White House, ^o then you went through Mitchell and Moon or . . .

HENRY: Well, ^e than ^o but of course after this meeting we had direct access to him.

O'BRIEN: Was there anybody in the White House that was particularly simpatico that you could go through? [?] how about, ^[Clarence F.] Kenny O'Donald ^{well} or ^[Clarence F.] O'Brien . . .

HENRY: No. Well, that O'Brien was, you know, amicable ^o but anytime we had trouble getting to the President, he had appointed a young fellow in ^{the} Justice ^[Department], named John Doar,

that could always get us to him by telephone. If you called John, John would arrange it.

O'BRIEN: Well going back in your own involvement in Mississippi politics, what were you doing in 1960, late ^{fifties} 50's and ^{sixties?} 60's let's say, starting with the election of Governor [Ross R.] Barnett here? did you take a part in that at all, in that election?

HENRY: Well, yes, I'm sure I voted in it. Certainly ^I would have had no real enthusiasm about ^{the} candidates, frankly, we've had so much of the less-of-the-evils kind of politics in this area. I've never had an opportunity ^{for} an all-out ^{side} actually for a guy that I really wanted as far as a Governor was concerned, but we've ^{James Plemmon}

O'BRIEN: How did you react to Coleman?

HENRY: Well, I thought Coleman was less able ^{and} than Barnett, but in terms of identifying with the problems of the poor and the black, Coleman's campaign was just as racist as Barnett's.

O'BRIEN: Have you ever met either of these men and talked to them for any length of time? What's your impressions of Coleman?

HENRY: Well, I think that he's smarter than Barnett. I think he's pretty much what you call a bigot Northern-style as compared to Barnett, bigot Southern-style. I think that Barnett identifies himself from the word say go. ^{You know} What you can expect of him, I recall, Mr. Barnett's first year in the Governor's office. He gave an organization known as the Council of Federated Organizations, ¹ which was a compilation of the civil rights, church, civic, entertainment groups ¹ a

committee from this group an opportunity to visit with him. And we went in and sat down with the Governor and the Attorney General [Joe T. Patterson] who just died, and Secretary of State, Heber Ladner, members of the State Sovereignty Commission, and I assume some guys from the White Citizens' Council; there were a whole room full of them. We identified to him, at that point, what we were discontent with and what we were going to move against. Of course, this was still the question of segregation and the continued violation of states of the in '54 The Supreme Courts decision, and we enumerated the question of police brutality, and the absence of employment of blacks from the various State Bureau's and Agencies, that we intended to use whatever means we could find within

the right to vote and the question of

the Federal Government to overcome these problems. So we just simply told us, "well I understand your point of view and I want you to understand mine when you get ready to move against the State, I'm going to move against you with everything I've got." So we understand each other, you see.

Now the difference with Mr. Coleman was we could never get an audience with him. He probably had audiences with some people within the teachers profession or some members in the black community that were pretty much all parrots to what he wanted to hear. Something was true with Paul Johnson, And I guess now ^{to some degree} with John Bell [Williams]. But of the last four Governor's the only guy that has granted an audience to a committee from the State Community so selected by the black's themselves, was Barnett.

O'BRIEN: You feel that he had a pretty good grasp of Mississippi politics, a pretty good grasp of what was going on in the early ^{sixties,} '60's before he was Governor?

HENRY: Oh sure. He knew the white folks were in control, sure.

O'BRIEN: Well, do you think h^e's pretty reflective of how white people in Mississippi think?

HENRY: Yes. Well, I'm not too sure he is actually reflective of how a majority of them think, but he is understandable as to how a lot of them act. Because many whites act out of intimidation and fear, rather than out of the really the confin^es of heart and the confin^es of soul. The number of guy^s that it's my opportunity to identify and associate with, ^{Kids here just made} it's like the two cases now. We've been friends for ¹² twelve or ¹⁵ fifteen years, Mississippi boys,

and The kind of report you see between us
 is not at all unusual, and I know that
 more whites don't think the ^{correct} way
 than do, But when it comes to having to
 make an identification of how you feel with
 other whites present that you know, or that
 you don't really know how they feel, or
 you know that they don't think ^{the way} you do,
 Most whites are intimidated and are afraid
 to take a stand. That's true in Mississippi
 and Maine, California and everywhere else.

O'BRIEN: Well, did the rise in ^{of} the Citizens' Councils
 in those years have a lot of effect?

HENRY: Yes. The Citizens' Council was born somewhere
 in '54 or '55, which was after the passage
 of the Supreme Courts decision of 1954
 which outlawed segregation of public schools,
but it really didn't make too much difference
 in the terms of the activities of white
 people nor blacks, because this was pretty

much the image that the whites had projected all along.

O'BRIEN: Was there an increase in legislation in attempts to (persuade) institutionalize segregation in those years?

HENRY: There were acts passed, with attempts to strengthen the opportunity of lasting with the segregation syndrome longer.

I remember one particularly they passed a bill that outlawed the public school ^{no, the public school} ~~accommodated~~ attendance law, which was really saying that no white kid would have to, would be forced by law, ^{to attend} such in school with a black. This was the real intent of it. Ofcourse, this law now has more difficulty in terms of an increasing amount of illiteracy. In 1969, ^{rather} there was than a decreasing amount of illiteracy. I'd like to refer you to a column by Jerry Dilorie -- it's about two Sunday's ago, you'd

have to do a little bit of archives ^{work} to find it. Where he spoke about the great number of people who start school and who don't complete it. [Interruption]

O'BRIEN: What were you doing in the ^{at} '60 election? Did you take any involvement at all in Mississippi politics, Presidential election, or in his primary, ^{either one?}

HENRY: No. Not as, shall we say, an activist or overt individual involved directly in the campaign. I was attracted to Kennedy, like many other Americans were, as we saw him on TV. Then there were many people in the community who ^{were} actively proselytizing ^{is} for him, some because of his religious beliefs, and of course, I had attended a Catholic Institution and many of the friends of the white community, ^{for} I developed ^[Roman] early in life were members of the Catholic Church. So this is where we really began

much of our dialogue, on the question of politics, in which ^{we} we were going to have to go. I ^{at} ~~sat~~ up all night ^{that night}, until the election was over. ^{To} To see him win it by the skin of his teeth, and was glad that he won it.

O'BRIEN: Did you serve on any committee ^s or contribute any money or anything like this to any organizations?

HENRY: No.

O'BRIEN: When was the first time in your involvement ^{here} in politics that you started making contact with the federal government? Were they coming in here in your role ^{and leaving} . . .

HENRY: The first time that we had any contact with the federal government that I would consider meaningful was immediately after the election of Mr. Kennedy. John Doqr and the young fellow who was handling the trial ^{down in} of John ^{Hattinburg}

now, ^[Version] the ¹ dinner thing --

he'd never forgive me if I couldn't think of his name, ^{the} Robert Owens. They came in one day and wanted to get some idea about what we thought was right, what we thought was wrong, and how ^{to} we go about resolving it, and identifying themselves as agents from the United States Department of Justice. We had been studied so many damn times by agents from the federal government. Many times the guys would walk off and leave the notes ^{on} from the table. The next guy who came in had absolutely no information on what conversation you'd had with the guy previous. It was just a situation where there was some toe-touching but no real identity of involvement. [Interruption]

O'BRIEN: Let's go into 1961 and some of those early contacts with the Justice Department.

Do you feel that you got a pretty good . . .

HENRY:

Well, as I say, after Doqr and Bob came in, we told them, "now we're going to sit down and talk to you fellow," but we know nothings going to happen because we've been through this ritual time and time again; ^{it's} wasted your time and ^{it's} wasted ours. We're not about to give you the opportunity to say that you didn't do anything, ^{no' thing} because we didn't cooperate with you. " So we carried them upstairs and sat them down, ^{and} the Branch Leadership - R.L. Drew, who was Chairman of the Board; Vera Pigeo who's Secretary; I was there and I'm sure, maybe Cleo Jackson and ^{Hockett} H.Y. Actkins, ^{what's} Treasurer, ^{Some} Seven or eight of us ^{and there was} . . . We talked about all the things I've mentioned to you that we recently spoke ^{with} to Mr. Kennedy about. They promised us that there would be

a different kind of relationship from
now on. If they were not able to pro-
duce, they themselves would find some-
thing else to do, because they felt highly
committed to the same kinds of problems and

^{priorities}
that we did. So // . [INTERRUPTIONS]