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JLFT 005 Fredrick Richardson
John LeFlore Oral History Tapes (JLFT), Acc. 328
Interviewed by John Beebee and Sheila Flanagan on October 16, 1996
57 minute audio recording • 20 page transcript

Abstract: In this recording, Fredrick Richardson is interviewed by John Beebee and Sheila Flanagan to discuss John LeFlore and the Civil Rights Movement in Mobile, Alabama. Mr. Richardson describes working with John LeFlore at the post office, and Mr. LeFlore's activism both inside and outside of that space. He also discusses some of the political differences and points of agreement between himself and Mr. LeFlore, including his own personal choice not to work with the Non-Partisan Voters League, and Mr. LeFlore's decision not to work with the NOW movement. He also describes the voting boycott that the NOW movement called for, which led to Joe Langan losing the Mobile mayoral election of 1969.

Sheila Flanagan and John Beebee led the interviews for this project, recording the reflections of relatives, friends, and colleagues of Mobile activist John LeFlore for an Alabama Public Television documentary released under the title, "A Quiet Revolution: The Story of John L. LeFlore." The project was funded through an Alabama Humanities Foundation grant.

Preface: This is a transcript of an oral history recording archived at the McCall Library of the University of South Alabama. Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, which has been minimally edited for readability.



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JLFT 005 Fredrick Richardson
Interviewed October 16, 1996

This is a verbatim transcript of an oral history interview recording, composed and formatted in accordance with the McCall Library transcription style guide.

Verbatim transcription is a style of representing as closely as possible the exact wording and phrasing of the speakers on the recording, though false starts, repetitious phrases, and other minor edits have been made as needed only for the sake of clarity and readability. Readers of this transcript are strongly encouraged to listen to the recording.

Please note that if any text is **bolded** in the transcript, this indicates uncertainty of either spelling or accuracy of transcription regarding what was said. Italics indicate emphasis, or are applied to titles and similar proper nouns.

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JLFT 005

Interviewee: Fredrick Richardson

Interviewer: John Beebee (with Sheila Flanagan)

Date: October 16, 1996

R: The county seat being Evergreen, I was born seven miles south of Evergreen in a remote community called Nymph. And I finished high school at Conecuh County Training School in 1958 and moved to Mobile. And I got a job at the Postal Service in 1961. I met Mr. J.L. LeFlore there at the Postal Service, he was there when I got there. And of course, I retired as manager of station branch operation, 1992. And I have published a number of books, and I am basically writing, in a writing mode now. I have just written a play, "The Birth of a Church," depicting the early beginning of the Stone Street Baptist Church that will be dramatized before The National Baptist Convention in December of this year, and they're going to make a movie out of it also. So, I've been sort of busy. [Laughter]

B: I would say so! Tell us about the first time you met John LeFlore. Did you hear about him before you met him, or how did you hear about him?

R: Oh yes, I heard about him. When I first got to Mobile, I heard about him. Mr. LeFlore had made a name for himself from the [19]30s. He had investigated lynchings. He was a loner; he had gone all over the state of Alabama trying to correct the ills of the system. He was the number one militant from the [19]30s through the latter part of the [19]60s. Until the Neighborhood Organized Workers came on the scene, he was the number one militant. He had challenged the—I knew him well at the Postal Service because he challenged the promotion and hiring practices of the Postal Service. For instance, Blacks could only work as janitors and carriers. We could work as carriers because we had to carry the mail; it was heavy! It was sacks of mail that we had to put on our backs. But in the inside of the post office, they were selling stamps; they were clerks. We couldn't work as clerks. Those jobs were reserved for white people. I had an uncle, **Jerry C. Mason**, who passed the clerk carrier exam here in Mobile. He opted to be a clerk. They sent him to Birmingham, Alabama, and he retired from the Postal Service up there as a clerk. You could not work as a clerk, and John LeFlore *challenged* that. And they got rid of that system. We couldn't use the bathroom downstairs at the Postal Service. He challenged that, and we were able to use all of the bathrooms at the Postal Service. We couldn't work as supervisors; he challenged that. And we—well, I became a Black manager! [Laughter] So they came back at him saying that he was un-American, and his activity was un-American. They tried to prosecute him; they couldn't do it. Then in 1956, he organized the Non-Partisan Voters League, and they said that that was a political group. And under the Hatch Act, with the Postal Service, you could not be political. So, they tried to prosecute him with that, and tried to dismiss

him from his job. It didn't work. So, he was something like President Clinton: that you can knock him down, but you better believe he was coming back! [Laughter]

B: Well, what about—how did he successfully defend, how'd he successfully challenge something, I'm sure, that was there for decades, those policies of discrimination? How did he—what was his tactic? How did he—?

R: Well, for one thing, Mr. LeFlore was president of the NAACP prior to 1956. Okay? In 1956, they outlawed the NAACP in the state of Alabama. He organized the Non-Partisan Voters League, but he became director of casework, and he still had a liaison with the NAACP—with the Legal Defense Fund. So, whenever he'd—they knew what he was doing. He was really fighting—it was the NAACP *underground*. The Non-Partisan Voters League was nothing more than the NAACP underground. So, they knew they had to protect John in order to get any progress done here. So when he got in trouble, they sent a battery of New York lawyers here, and— [Laughter]—they beat them into the mud! So, he just kept right on. He's just like this Timex; he took a lick and kept on ticking! [Laughter]

B: That's great. What are some of the things—I heard like sometimes they had brought up some really minor charges against him, little things. What kind of harassment did they give him when he was working for the Postal Service?

R: Well, you know, they say he was taking his break—we didn't have any breaks. We had a 30-minute lunch period. And so, they would go out there and they would say, "He spent thirty-one minutes for lunch, and therefore he was beating the Postal Service out of money." But he basically carried mail to white people. And they *loved* him! *They loved him!* And his people rose to his occasion. He had people knocking on the postmaster's door saying, "No, this is a fine man. We can't lose this person." He was loved on his route, because he kept that smile on his face. You had to see him to know him, because he was very mild-mannered. He was very cordial. And his demeanor was so pleasing that you couldn't dislike him. But now, if you read about him in the paper, you could dislike him. But once you *met* him, you could not dislike him. Because his demeanor was just exceptional. He was a very kind-hearted, warm person. I never heard him say an unkind word to anybody. Even though they would charge him whenever—if he had a news conference, he was just as kind and mild-mannered—. [Laughter] He was a exceptional person. He was very qualified for the task that he had to perform. Very qualified.

B: So, you're saying some of the white community rallied around him? Is that what you're saying?

R: Yes! They loved him on his route. They loved him on his route. Yeah, the people that he carried mail to? They loved him. For one thing, he knew everybody. He knew all the childrens, he knew all the dogs. When they met him on the route: "John, you have any mail for me today?" "Oh, yes! Yes ma'am, yes ma'am." They could pick their mail up any time of the day. He knew them! If they put a new person on the route, say, "Can I get my mail?" "No ma'am, you have to wait till I get to your house." Not John. "Oh, yes ma'am! Just hold it right there, yes ma'am!" He would get the mail—they loved him. They loved him to death. And he was an outstanding letter carrier. It's a shame that he was not able to rise in the ranks of the Postal Service, because he certainly had the potential to do that. We saw that in the state legislature when he went up there. So, he had leadership ability. He was at the right place at the wrong time.

B: But he paved the way for others?

R: Yes, paved the way for me! He paved the way for me.

B: Wow.

R: Yes.

B: Do you remember—describe your relationship with him. What kind of relationship did you have with Mr. LeFlore?

R: Well, I had a very friendly relationship with Mr. LeFlore. When 1968 came, the number one militant organization organized in 1968: the Neighborhood Organized Workers. After the death of like Martin Luther King Jr., what happened, we were still—we were still under the auspices of the NAACP. So, we put in for a parade permit—and we were all meeting together: LeFlore, all of us were all meeting together trying to bring about changes. So, when Dr. King died, we put in for a parade permit. All we wanted to do was commemorate his death. That's all we wanted to do: go out there and talk about how great he was. They said, "No." The city officials: "No. No, we can't have you all down here. You might cause trouble." So, the officials in the NAACP told us we can't go, you know. We've been turned down, we can't go. So, we were the young group. We said, "We going! We are going. Yes, we are going. We don't need no permission"—that the constitution say we have a right to assemble. So, we went on anyway. And of course, they called the police out. They didn't do anything. But we decided from that meeting that we were not going back to the NAACP, we were not going back to the Non-Partisan

Voters League, because they were following the legal system. We were following the Constitution. So, other words, we weren't going to ask a judge, could we sit in the park; because we already *had* those rights! We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. That's what we were following: that they are endowed by their created with certain inalienable rights. We took that to mean *nobody* could take those rights from us—which was life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. And we didn't *need* permission; by the virtue of the fact that we were born in this city, we could do anything anybody else was doing. That was our philosophy. Well, the Non-Partisan Voters League would file a suit and challenge that. They'd send somebody out there to sit down and let them get arrested, just to get it in the court so somebody could say, "Yes, you could sit down." Well, we didn't follow that. So, I saw us drifting apart in philosophy the latter part of the 1960s. Because they were pursuing their struggle in the court system—which I applaud. Which I applaud. We followed Dr. King's movement, nonviolent direct action. As a matter of fact, we were affiliated with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, with Dr. King's group. They came here and brought us our charter. So, we were nonviolent. But we certainly took to the street, in boycotting, and picketing, and demonstrating. I don't know of a mass march that Mr. LeFlore was in, because they followed the traditions of the NAACP. They went in the courtroom. And they did an outstanding job. So, we were on a different front from his front. So what the system did then, they labeled him as acceptable in the latter part of the [19]60s. He was no longer the militant. *We* were the militants! [Laughter] He became acceptable; they put him on boards. On the water board, they put him on boards trying to send a signal to the community, that follow him: "Follow him, not them!" So, we sort of drifted apart in philosophy. We had a awful lot of respect for each other. Whenever we saw each other, we--you know, we shook hands, and we had a cordial conversation. We loved one another, but our philosophies—he often told me that, if you not careful, you're going to get into trouble. He was always concerned about me, that the system would come after me if I pursued nonviolent direct action. He was correct, he was correct at that. Because the system—I suffered a lot by following that, but I wouldn't take back anything. If I had to do it all over again, I'd do it the same way. [Laughter] Even though we had different philosophies, we had respect, one for the other.

B: Would you say those two—would you say the two groups were opposing each other, or they're just maybe attacking a problem from two different fronts?

R: Both, both.

B: Okay.

- R: It was both. Because then, there came—see, with the Neighborhood Organized Workers came the Civil Rights Movement. It's a difference. Now, Mr. LeFlore headed up a civil rights organization, but that was not, that was not a Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement meant you had the masses following you. So, every week, we had three or four hundred people here for two years. So, that's a *movement*, you see? So, Mr. LeFlore was heading up a civil rights organization, where we headed up a Civil Rights Movement. Okay, *then* that became a struggle for leadership. Who would lead the masses? Okay, it was obvious that the masses were out here with us. So, when they had their meeting, it was their executive board; it was not the public. We had our meeting—we had two meetings. The executive board met on Tuesday night. On Wednesday night, we had hundreds of people. And then we shared with that group what the executive board, the direction we were going to take. Any new developments, we shared that. They didn't do that; they didn't do that. So, it appeared as though the masses were following us. So the system—and things were changing too fast. Things were just changing too fast. So, the system would try to slow it down. They created biracial commissions, and they put the ministers on that—they wouldn't put Mr. LeFlore on it because he was too militant. They tried a number of things to slow it down, but the momentum was too strong. And Mr. LeFlore really thought that—he provided the right leadership for the community at that particular time, and I respect him for that. We felt that he provided the right leadership in relationship to the courts. But in relationship to nonviolent direct action, which was a whole new philosophy, we felt that he was derelict in that. That he was not the leader for that. That the masses should—and rightfully should be behind us. So, it was a struggle for leadership.
- B: Now early on, what—the Non-Partisan Voters League started around [19]56, I think you said. Now back then, you seemed to be more convergence with Mr. LeFlore, maybe—was there any reason that you chose not to join the League?
- R: Yeah; it was moving too slow! When I saw that the city turned us down, and they came out and said—it was the NAACP and the League were all in agreement that it's illegal. You know? We'd been turned down by the city fathers, we can't march. "Well," we said, "the right of peaceful assembly is in the constitution. So we shouldn't even ask them. We shouldn't have asked them could we go to church and commemorate. Why did we even ask them? So we going to march anyway." "No, we're not going"—so, they didn't go. "No, we, unh-uh, that's illegal. That's illegal." So they strictly fought the legal system to change the legal system. And even—so what we saw, especially with the *Brown vs Board of Education* decision—by the way, Mr. LeFlore filed his suit in 1953. And it's just that the one

in Topeka, Kansas came before the Supreme Court first. But not that John hadn't already filed. He had already filed in 1953 challenging the segregated school system. In other words, he was just as fast as the people in Kansas; they came up before the Supreme Court before his suit. He had already filed. He was on top of things, it's no doubt about it, in the courts. He was on top of it, in the courtroom. So, the legal system—they stuck with the legal system. We refused to follow that. We violated it, we didn't care what the legal system say.

B: When did NOW began, and who began it?

R: April 1968. After the death of Dr. Martin Luther King. We organized in 1968, right after the death of Dr. Martin Luther King. See, that organization was already in place a year so, but it was in place as a cleanup group. We went from neighborhood to neighborhood cleaning up paper. But we changed the direction of that organization. 1968, the organization was already in place. We decided then that we was going to fight the system, take that organization and fight the system in 1968. That's what we did. We revamped it to fight the system. We went full speed ahead.

B: That was headed by—?

R: Noble C. Beasley, who, by the way, is in prison. He's a political prisoner. They gave him 33 years, and he fought his way out of that conspiracy; they came back on conspiracy again and they gave him life without parole. He's in prison now. He's a political prisoner.

B: What did they charge him with?

R: Drugs. Said he was—they say he conspired to distribute drugs. Drugs that no one ever saw, it was no drugs ever presented in the courtroom, and the man, the principal witness, was a man who had three life sentences already in prison; he was their principal witness. So, you know, if I got life three times, and they tell me I can get out if I tell on somebody, the average person would tell on they own momma if that would get them out. So, that's what they used. And they cited a period some years in the past. In other words, retro activity. That, "I know you not doing it now, but I hear tell of 19—." [Laughter] They named some year in the past, and it's gone. It's gone.

B: Tell us about—do you know—do you remember seeing this? This is a little poster here that came out. Was that—

R: Yeah, uh-huh.

B: Do you remember that meeting? That was—what does that say? Tell us about that.

R: It say, “Know your rights under the new Civil Rights Act.” The Civil Rights Act—you know, we had the Voting Rights Act of 1964, and the Civil Rights Act of 1965. That's again, because this was again the reason for us to organize. See, what I initially started saying: in 1954 they outlawed segregation. But in 1963, Mr. LeFlore was just—he had just was able to get into Murphy High School with it. So we've gone nine years, and nothing had happened. 1965, they outlawed segregation in eating establishments, and hotels, and all that. By 1969, we had to put our money in the front of the bus, run round to the back of the bus and pray that the bus driver wouldn't pull off. We could not sit in Bienville Square downtown in 1969. We had absolutely *nobody* working downtown except clerks, and maids, and janitors, and elevator operators. We had absolutely *no one* working in city hall except janitors and maids. None! By 1969, they had done good at changing the laws, but in reality it had not affected anything. That fueled the Neighborhood Organized Workers. So we saying, “So, if we change the law, we still—any right that we have that we don't use, we'll lose. So the reason we don't have those rights: we have not used those rights.” So you can't say, “Well, they done passed a law that say we can ride the bus and sit in the front.” What you got to do is go up there and sit in the front of the bus. You don't need to go down and ask the judge, can you sit down. You need to go up there; that was the attitude of the Neighborhood Organized Workers. We didn't get no permission to sit at a lunch counter. We didn't get no permission to sit in Bienville Square. We went down there and sat down.

B: You mean, tell me about that—you were not allowed to sit in a park?

R: No! No! Downtown in Bienville Square, we couldn't. We could *walk* through there—and they had officers standing around—we could walk through Bienville Square. We could not sit down. In 1969! I'm not talking about 1929. 1969, we could not sit in Bienville Square.

B: Is this a city law, or—

R: When they built the Municipal Auditorium downtown, they built it with a Colored entrance around the back. But the Neighborhood Organized Workers overlooked—and they knew we were going in the front. So, they just took the

Colored section down. [Laughter] They knew we weren't going in no back. They knew we were going in the front. So when our organization was born, then they had to say, "Okay, you know they ain't going take that." So they had to kind of change their attitude. But when they built that auditorium, they had a Colored section back there for us to come in. They did.

B: That's amazing. What do you think—what was Mr. LeFlore like to work with? Was he easy man to work with? Difficult to work with? What kind of personality did he have, that kind of thing? Tell us about that.

R: I never heard him bicker about anything. I never heard him bicker. Even though his philosophy—well now, we met often with him because what we were trying to do, we were trying to show him how we were not trying to usurp any of his power, how we could work together. So we met often, awful lot of times, in that vein trying to mediate the situation. And we tried to show him where the system was just using him. And oftentimes, we didn't see it the same thing. But he left the meeting, he shook everybody' hand; he was just as cordial when he left as he was when he came. [Laughter] That was just his style. You know, he was a very mild-mannered person. I haven't ever seen him upset. I have not ever seen him upset. So you couldn't tell—maybe he was upset, but we had no way of telling.

B: There's some that people that accused him of being—within the Black community—accused him of being an Uncle Tom-type of person. How would you say? How would you—

R: First of all, let me describe Uncle Tom. An Uncle Tom, in my view—and I got that definition in my book, too. And I'm not going name the title of the book. [Laughter] My definition of an Uncle Tom is one who, in light of all the prevailing changes, still carried on in the old way. For instance, when we used to put the money in the front of the bus and run around to the back and get on—that's one thing. But once we changed that situation where you could put your money in the front and sit down anywhere you want to, anybody was still putting their money in the front and running around the back was a Uncle Tom. Other words, if you refuse to change and bring yourself up to date with the prevailing changes, if you are still trying to carry on like your foreparents did in the past, in slavery, we labeled you as an Uncle Tom. Well, some people—the Neighborhood Organized Workers was moving so fast, and bringing about changes. And a number of people felt LeFlore should've kept up to date with us. LeFlore was not a member of the Neighborhood Organized Workers. He was not a member of the Neighborhood Organized Workers. But a number of people felt like his attitude should have been the same

as those who followed the Neighborhood Organized Workers. And since his attitude was not the same as that, he was viewed as an Uncle Tom. The other issue was politics, in that the Non-Partisans Voters League screened candidates, and they endorsed—they put out the pink sheet; they *endorsed* candidates. Well, the Neighborhood Organized Workers, we called for a forum. Said, “Bring all the candidates in here.” And we asked each one the same question: “What are you going to do for us if you get to be elected?” And we had the TV people there. See, when we invited them, we didn't tell them that we were going to invite the media. So they came prepared to put the okie-dokie on us. We had the media, newspapers, okay. We want the world to know, now: “What are you going to do, now?” “Nothing, we not going do nothing.” Because they couldn't let the other part of the community know that they were going to give us anything. So, “That's it for you. Next! What are you going—?” None of them were willing to say that they were going to give us anything, but yet they had been endorsed. All of them had been endorsed by the Non-Partisan Voters League. So what we did in 1969, we call in a no-vote. Said, all of these candidates said that they not going to do anything for us; why are we going to the polls? So, they raised the issue: that's our right to vote. We raised the issue: it's our right *not* to vote. It's our right, we do with it what we want to. You can't make us vote! We have a right not to vote just like we have a right *to* vote. Say, “Well, we had people who died for us to get the right to vote.” So, “Right. But they died for us to have the right *not* to vote; it's freedom! So we are not going to vote.” And the not-voting, most of those politicians were voted out. And a number of people labeled Mr. LeFlore as an Uncle Tom, because those candidates that lost had been endorsed by the Non-Partisan Voters League. So, yes, we've had some people to label him as an Uncle Tom. But looking at him in context of history, Mr. LeFlore was following the tradition of the NAACP, which was the same philosophy as the Non-Partisans Voters League. They were fighting the system in the courts. And they were trying to get as much for us through endorsing the candidates as they could. We tried to get more out of them than what Mr. LeFlore—we were trying to get more out of them.

B: Were those pink sheets, up to that time that you mentioned there, were they effective in getting Blacks to come out to vote for the endorsed candidates? Where they effective in—

R: Prior to 1969—on the eve of the 1973 election, Noble Beasley was arrested for conspiracy. Other words, they were not going to leave him on the street to do that to them again. They had to know. In other words, once they had gone to the Non-Partisan Voters League and got screened and got cleared, they didn't want the water muddied again. So on the eve of the 1973 election, he went to prison. For

33 years. One of the charges was that he didn't pay his income tax. And they said it was something like 250 dollars. He got 10 years. Ten years for evading income tax. Income tax evasion.

B: Wow.

R: It was about 250 dollars they say he didn't pay.

B: What, let me think here—well let's ask about, we're on that subject right now. Mr. Langan, Joseph Langan, seemed to work with—I mean he worked alongside Mr. LeFlore in instituting a lot of changes in Mobile. Describe your organization's relationship with Mr. Langan, and were—did you have anything to do with his subsequent defeat, or whatever he kind of—

R: Yes! Yes, we had a lot to do with his defeat. First of all, Mr. Langan was a peacekeeper. I give him an "A." He didn't want Mobile to have the trauma that they had in Selma, and in Montgomery, and in Birmingham. He was trying to avoid that—and he did! He did avoid that. For instance, in 1968, we hit the streets almost every night: we had a march or demonstration, we were picketing somebody. So Mr. Langan could have sent to Selma and borrowed Jim Clarke's electrical cattle prods, and he could've given them to the police officers, and he could've done just like Jim Clark did on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. He could've fired those things up and charged us with it. He didn't do that. He could've sent to Birmingham, and he could've got Bull Connor's dogs, and he could've sicced those on us. He didn't do that. He could have phoned the fire department and told them, "Turn the high-pressure water hose on them." He didn't do that. Because he did not have the madness and the meanness in his heart. And probably the reason is, because he was in the city of Mobile. We didn't have a plantation here, he didn't have the plantation mentality. He was not from the interior, where you got to keep those in the field in check else they going get out of hand. He did not have that plantation mentality. But we did have a commissioner from the interior who did come off of the plantation, and he brought with him the plantation mentality: Lambert C. Mims. "Shoot to kill," that was his order. If anybody get out of hand, "Shoot to kill." Which was the same Jim Clark, Bull Connor philosophy, because he came from the interior. But by and large, most of the commissioners were from here, they did not have the madness and the meanness in their heart. Now, Mr. Langan was a man who tried to keep the peace, but he was not trying to expand opportunities. He was not trying to do that. He was not trying to let a Black sit down on the city commission. He was not trying to let a Black be a clerk in the courthouse. He was not trying to do that. *We* were trying to do that. And our point to Mr. Langan is that,

“You're a great peacekeeper. We give you a 'A' for that. Our time has come. Get out of the way.” That was our message to him. That you have done a great job in what you were doing; give us a chance. Give us a chance now. He was not willing to do that! [Laughter] He was not willing to do that. As a matter of fact, it was not until 1985 that we had the kind of government downtown that women, for the first time—other words, the same day that a Black person went to city hall, was the same day a white woman went. The same day a Black man in [19]72 went to state legislature, that's the day a white woman went. So, the movement was more than expanding the opportunities for Blacks. It was expanding the opportunities of minorities, including women, because they hadn't gotten nowhere. As a matter of fact, Blacks had the right to vote before women. They didn't get the right to vote until 1920. The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1865, for us. Womens didn't have the right to vote until 1920. So what we were doing, we were, as a matter—when you go to these—it's probably one out here now—when you go to these buildings and you see the handicapped parking space marked aside? The Civil Rights era made that possible. The handicapped had to park where the handicapped could. And you go in these bathrooms and you see these special commodes where they can pull themselves up? The Civil Rights Movement made that possible. That's what made it possible.

[Break in recording]

R: And early that morning, you go find that postman and say, “John I need my check.” “Hold it, hold it; yes, yes.” And that's hard to beat! [Laughter] That's hard to beat. And that's the kind of person he was. He knew everybody. Okay.

F: [Inaudible 30:20]

R: Okay.

F: See, Mr. Richardson don't pay me any attention.

R: Yes I am.

F: So you will understand, Mr. Richardson is my boss. He's the only reason—.

B: Okay, let me hit one more time on Mr. Langan, then I want to talk about the meetings you had here. How was—Mr. LeFlore worked with Mr. Langan very closely, and he seemed crushed when Mr. Langan was defeated. You said that the organization might've had something to do with that defeat—

R: Oh yes, yes.

B: What was the logic behind—here's a man that, he had done a lot, like you said, done a lot for the community. But what was the logic behind getting him out of the way? There wasn't a Black candidate against him?

R: The logic was to send a message. No, we were not trying to get a Black candidate. The logic was to send a message to the political system that when 1973 come, when we ask them, "Can we have a clerk?" Then the next incumbent will say, "Yes, you can have a clerk." "Can you take the Colored water fountains out of city hall?" They'll say, "Yes, we'll remove the Colored water fountains out of city hall." We wanted a candidate who would say yes to those things. We knew we couldn't get a Black candidate elected, but all of them had told us no. They all had told us no. So, we wanted them to know the balance of power is in our hand. You can endorse all the—you can get all the pink sheets endorsed you want to; we have the balance of power, we going to prove it to you. And that was our point.

B: Tell us about the meetings you had here. You had—you were here in this very room. Tell us what it was like being here, and—

R: They were all around the wall--all of the seats were filled. They were all around the wall, was standing room only. They were standing all outside, out there. They had police—you would think that you had gone to Saddam Hussein: they had police, they had teargas, masks, helicopters. You would think you were in a war zone. And to think that people would face that! See, the purpose of that was to frighten the people. Once you crossed Broad Street, when you saw all of those police officers, you would say, "My god, I'm going back home." No. No. And what made us come on anyway? I don't know! [Laughter] I don't know. But we were here, with the police and all. We came, they had informants in the meeting; we didn't care. And normally, we would have someone from the SCLC to come and give us a pep talk--Abernathy, someone would come. If not, we had enough information to share with them that we kept them fired up. And they kept coming. The main thing that happened was every Tuesday night we had an executive board meeting, and that's the meeting where you could lodge your complaints. So, they would come and say, "I was working at Coca Cola company and they fired me"; "I was working here and they did this this and this." "I was working at Delchamps and they fired me." "They won't hire me in here." We set up pickets on those places. We had a committee. Say, "Okay, so you said they don't have any clerks at Delchamps? We sent a committee to meet with them." "So, listen why won't you hire Blacks?" "Well, we

just not going to hire any Blacks.” Say, “Okay, but majority of your customers in the community are Black people.” “We don't care. We don't think they qualified.” Say, “Well, we are going put pickets on your store until such time.” And a lot of time, it take us two or three months, but they'll come back and say yes. And then we go tell the other stores, “Let that be a warning. You don't need us to se—” They say, “Oh no, we going hire some!” So it be a snowball effect. So, they would come here to hear what we had done, and we would have plenty to tell because we would've sent people throughout the community, and we would name—go right down the list: say, “This is what has happened.” And were just energetic to the people. We were getting so much done. For instance, the cookie companies, the bread companies. What we would do, we had Smith and Colonial. We would boycott Smith but not Colonial. We would say, “You buy from Colonial, but don't buy from Smith.” So Smith would, “Oh, okay,” say, “well okay, we'll put a salesman on.” So then, we'll go boycott the other one! [Laughter] So. We would boycott Coke, but not Pepsi. So then Coke say, “Okay we'll put somebody on, we'll put some salesmen on.” We go right on to Pepsi, right on down the line until we got them all. We hit them all. It was no segment of the society, economically, that we didn't touch. We were everywhere. So, the people would really come here to get the report, to find out: what had we done? And then we organized our own newspaper, the *Call and Post*. Once a week, we had a newspaper out that was crammed full of stuff that we had done. We put out handbills similar to this—we had handbills, we had people on all the major street corners passing out handbills. So people, they were very well informed on what was going on. So they came here to see: what are they doing now? They couldn't miss it, they wanted to know.

B: What do you think—back to Mr. LeFlore—what do you think motivated him? What was the thing that was driving him—he devoted a lot of time and energy to the cause of civil rights. What was it that was—?

R: Mr. LeFlore wanted to see a society where people no longer would be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. He wanted to see a society where it was a level playing field. And if you didn't get to the finish line, you either failed or it was something on your part stopped you. He didn't want no boulders, no rocks, no mud puddles in front of nobody that's running. Wanted all of the runners to be the same. He was trying to create a level playing field in his own way. And he saw that the vehicle to do that was the legal system. If you could just change the legal system, that would get the boulders out of the way. And I'll say that it went a long way in getting the boulders out of the way, but the runners had to take to the field. Other words, you can get the law to say, “You can run in

the race.” But someone actually would have to go get in the race. That’s where we came in at.

B: Talk to me about the policy of agitation, your philosophy there, of agitation—I’ve heard you talk about that before.

R: Let me say this up front: we didn't know that Hoover had a agitators list. We got this information within the last year from the FBI, under the Freedom of Information Act. Our leaders were placed—Noble Beasley and James Finley was placed—on the agitators list at the highest order by J. Edgar Hoover. Which meant that wherever they went, they were followed. Now, how can a person be a dope distributor and you got every surveillance by the FBI, 24 hours a day, you got an agent assigned to him, but he’s putting out dope everywhere, and you don't have—? [Laughter] But we just getting this information, that he was put on the agitators list. Agitating mean that you're telling people to do something contrary to the prevailing philosophy of that community. That we’re living in a segregated community, and you’re trying to tell them to project themselves as equal. You're trying to integrate. That's agitating, is that you going against the wishes of society. And that's what they call “agitating”: that you’re really asserting yourself as an equal person when you know you're not. As a matter of fact, Mr. Mims said that he did—he wrote a book, *For Christ and Country*, and this is in his book: that he was really doing us a favor when he denied us the right to work as clerks. He said, because that would’ve given us the opportunity to demonstrate to the world how stupid and ignorant we were. And what he was trying to do—all he was trying to do was save us the embarrassment! [Laughter] That's what he said. Here's a man who never went to college a day in his life. So is Representative Senator Callahan. Never went to college a day in his life; US Representative. We wouldn't have sent—we would *not* have sent a person out that unqualified. We would not have sent a person out for a job of that importance. Just look at city hall: Cleon Johnson, master's degree; Vivian Figures—. We sent the top people from our community down to represent us. We wouldn't dare have sent a person right out the cotton fields, still got the little old dent in his shoulder where the cotton sack had been. That's who they sent down to be the mayor of the city; we would not have done that. We would not have done that.

B: Tell us about Mr. LeFlore as far as his ambitions. What were his goals in the [19]50s and [19]60s? What was his—

R: Expose the system. He was basically doing investigative work. He investigated lynchings. He did investigative work. He was trying—what Martin Luther King and

them did—see, LeFlore didn't use the mass media. Well, he didn't have the mass media to use; he didn't have it to use. But by 1963, and 1965, Dr. King and them, they perfected that. They put little children, said, "The children first." Because they know the news media was going lock in on that. So, when Bull Connor sicced the dogs on the children, then you had CBS, ABC, and all of them right there to show the whole world what they were doing. But Mr. LeFlore, he would've long exposed them if he had the news media. [Laughter] He was trying to expose them, but he was using the newspaper. Well, the people that write the newspaper, they were not going to expose themselves. They were not going to do that. So he would write it up and send off what he found, but he couldn't get no exposure. He was trying to expose the cruelty of the system. That's what he was trying to do.

B: Do you feel in your opinion, was he an effective spokesperson?

R: Oh, yes!

B: For the Black community.

R: Yes, I think he was an effective spokesperson. I think that the Neighborhood Organized Workers—he did not speak well against—he thought that the tactics we were using were out of line with the prevailing laws. We were still under a segregated system, and under the segregated system, you had to change the legal system before you could operate; we didn't do that. We didn't wait on all of that. So, he sort of felt like we was operating outside of the realm of the law, in that we were under a system that didn't permit what we were doing. So, when we finally got into the—for instance, the under the vagrancy law, it was against the law for Black people to congregate. And if you *did* congregate, you'd better have some money in your pocket. So, they would come down there: "What you boys doing?" [Laughter] "We're just standing, just standing here." They arrest you for being a vagrant. Well, that was the law. That was the law. So, we didn't let the law prevent us from congregating. Well, Mr. LeFlore would've had respect for the law. He would've had respect for the law. We didn't have no respect for that law because we thought it was a unjust law. And Dr. King did the same thing. Said he had a moral obligation to disobey an unjust law. So we was going right down the philosophy of Dr. King: we did not obey that. We went right on down.

B: What was—talk to me about Mr. LeFlore—describe him as a public speaker. Was he a good public speaker? Did he have charisma? What was he like? Tell us about that.

- R: Oh yes, yes. He didn't have no deep voice. He had sort of a light voice, but the depthness of what he had to say, you had to pay him some attention. Most times when Mr. LeFlore spoke, he was speaking about a case. He was just not randomly speaking. He would name a specific case when it was filed, and he would lead you down through that case so you had to almost follow him. You had to almost follow him. So he was director of casework, and when he got up, he stuck with what he was doing. The cases that he had filed, and what was the results of those cases. So, it's no doubt about it: he had your attention. He had your attention.
- B: As far as his leadership in the Black community, do you think—let's take it back this way—do you think he was too willing to work within the white power structure? Do you think he was too lenient in that sense? He wasn't militant enough? What's your opinion on that?
- R: I would've like to seen Mr. LeFlore join the movement. But looking back in retrospect, Mr. LeFlore should've been in the legal system where he was. The only thing I regret is that the two organizations was pitted against the other one, and basically I blame the system. Mr. Langan them went and got Mr. LeFlore and said, "You the leader. They're no leaders, they Johnny-Come-Latelies; they just got here. They wet behind the ears! You the leader, you been here since the [19]30s!" You know, the political people came and got to him. And then they appointed him on the water board, this that and the other. I wish that we had been wise enough to say that, "Mr. LeFlore is going to lead us on the legal fronts. He is going to be leading us on the legal fronts. But when it comes down to nonviolent direct action, we're going to take to the streets." We were not wise enough to do that, but in hindsight that's what we should've done. And I'm not blaming anybody, it's just that we were not wise enough to see that at that particular time. But Mr. LeFlore had a right to operate under the system that he operated from, because we needed to be operating from all fronts. From all fronts. And we certainly—look at the city government today. The only reason that case was *Bolden v. the City of Mobile*: because his last name started with a "B." Mr. LeFlore filed the case. And they had to get the person with the last name with the first alphabet. So, Mr. LeFlore was a "L," so Bolden got—it was Bolden versus the City of Mobile, it would've been-- LeFlore filed the case. LeFlore filed the case; wasn't Bolden. But Bolden was a party to it. That's why they used his name. But Bolden did not go downtown to file that case. J. L. LeFlore filed that case. So, you look at the school system, you look at the city government, you look at the county government, who saw what happened to the city and they acquiesced. And so, we done going through that. We have to say J.L. LeFlore. Now, I would say that the Neighborhood Organized Workers joined forces with the National Democratic Party of Alabama in the late

1960s to challenge at-large elections in the state of Alabama. Which resulted in the district—the reason our legislators are running our district. They used to all run at large; we had no Black ones. We challenged that in the federal court and won. So Mr. LeFlore piggybacked on that. That's the law that he cited, that we should not have at-large city elections. It's been proven in the state. But that was a suit we filed, to bring that about. But here in the city? It was Mr. LeFlore. It was singlehanded Mr. LeFlore. It was him!

B: Do you think, do you look back with—well, you kind of hit on this. Do you look back with regret in a way that the Black community was split? It seemed like there were, what? Two or three different organizations, and there was—. If you went back in time. NAACP also—.

R: Yes. [Laughter] Yes, had the NAACP also. Had Bob Gaillard out there. Yes, and then we had Mr. Montgomery, he had a group that was into voter registration, voter education. He had his group too. So, we had a number of groups operating out there—all of them was operating from a sound posture. Every one of those organizations were organizations that was operating from a sound posture, they should've been out there. But it was—the struggle was for leadership. Who would be recognized as the leaders? And clearly, when it comes down to the Civil Rights Movement, it was Noble C. Beasley. Clearly, when it came down to the legal front, it was J. L. LeFlore. It was John LeFlore and the Non-Partisan Voters League. But what happened, it took one man to go down to the courtroom to file that suit. It took hundreds and thousands of people to form a Civil Rights Movement. So, Mr. LeFlore was fighting on the civil rights front, but he was not a part of the great movement that had swept this nation. Because he was fighting them in the courtroom. So, it would look that Mr. Beasley had beat him out in terms of who would lead the masses. It would look like Mr. Beasley would beat him out. A matter of which I'm sure Mr. LeFlore didn't take kindly to.

B: However, when he ran for legislature, did NOW back him at that point?

R: Oh yes, yes, yes. We backed him. Yes, we backed him. Certainly.

B: That's good. Let me think here. You've hit all these questions real well. How did the—let's go to this—how did the League decide which candidates to endorse?

R: I don't—because I wasn't in there, I wasn't a part of—they had a screening group. We did not participate in that. We called a meeting—I literally said this in the book—we called a meeting with the officers of the Non-Partisan Voters League,

and we asked them not to take any money from any of the candidates. And we told them that if they did take any money, we going to expose them. That was a threat; we did not do that. We was trying to—we figured that if—. Our position was this: once the candidate give you the money, they don't owe the community anything else. They would've paid—they, "We done paid. So, why you asking us for a clear? We're paid! We're paid." So we were saying, as long as you take money, they don't owe us anything. So, don't take the money, and let's make them give us something. So we told them to their face that, you know, "If you take any more money we're going to expose you." We didn't do anything like that. So, whether they took any more money—well, I'm sure they did, because they had to—what they was saying is that it takes a lot of money to print all these ballots, to hire people to go from door to door to put all these ballots out on the eve of the election. Which I'm sure it did. It did. It took a lot of money for that.

B: What do you think—how's your view of Mr. LeFlore changed over the years?

R: Mr. LeFlore finally got to the situation where he was not traveling all over the state of Alabama. He was tired of—the school system, and the government, and the city and the county government took up a lot of Mr. LeFlore's time. Trying to be in—and he didn't live long enough to even see the change of government. He didn't live to see that. But he was determined at the end. He was determined to change. He had gone up to the state legislature, but he had not—that had not changed. The city was still intact. We had three commissioners which created—the 1901 Government pretty much set us up to knock out any participation. Really, George Washington and that group set the stage for the civil rights struggle, because they eliminated the mothers and the brothers. Nobody was in that meeting but white men. And they set up a government that acquiesced to white men, and denied the rights to everybody else. So, the struggle then became inclusion. The struggle then became inclusion. As a matter of fact, Crispus Attucks was the first person to die for the freedom of his country. He was a Black man. In 1776, when freedom finally came, they sat down and the Constitution hardly—it wrote us out. So, the struggle became apparent in 1776. So, Mr. LeFlore wanted to see inclusion. And Mr. LeFlore figured—which is the same reason I did —that you wouldn't need a Civil Rights Movement. The only reason we had a Civil Rights Movement is because we had no elected officials. That the way to eliminate all these mass marches is inclusion! If you got duly elected leaders, then you won't have to go around talking, "Is Mr. LeFlore a leader, or is he not the leader? Is Mr. Beasley the leader or is he not the leader?" Because if you elected, it's no question: you are the leader. So, Mr. LeFlore set out to create a political atmosphere where people from all communities could go downtown to get elected. Then that would be no need, and

no bickering about who the leader would be. In the latter part of his days, that's what he was trying to do.

B: Do you remember the day he died, what that was like? The response from the community, and—?

R: Oh yes, it was very sad. It was a sad day. It was a—I don't know of no one that I talked to that didn't feel remorse for that we had lost—it was a great loss. It was a great loss. He was a great freedom fighter. Mr. LeFlore was a great freedom fighter. And we had lost, certainly, a great freedom fighter. It was a sad day when we lost Mr. LeFlore.

B: Do you remember the response from the community as far as the number of people in the funeral and all that kind of stuff? Do you remember that?

R: It was very large. Huge funeral for Mr. LeFlore. Huge funeral for Mr. LeFlore. He was highly respected. I don't really know anybody who—you *had* to respect him! He was not irate, he was a kind-hearted, humble person. It would've been difficult not to respect Mr. LeFlore. Whether you liked him or not, you had to respect him. He was that kind of a person that you had to respect.

B: That says a lot. What do you think he should be remembered for? What do you think are his major contributions, major accomplishments? What should Mr. LeFlore be remembered for?

R: For education, and I think they were right in naming Toulminville High School, which was named after Judge Toulmin, the J.L. LeFlore High School. Because J.L. LeFlore fought for equal education. And he saw, and he understood that the more you learn, the more you earn; the more you know, the further you'll go. Mr. LeFlore understood that. So that's why he went to battle to—and he figured that if you really want power, get you some education. That the way for us to be in power was to get an education. So, he set out to bring down this system that denied equal access to education. He set out to bring that down. And that's one of the fronts we going to have to give him: Mr. LeFlore, he was a drum major for that. And the other one was the government, the city government down here. He wanted a government where you wouldn't be bickering about who led the people, who the leaders would be; and we finally got that. And so those are the two areas, I think, that Mr. LeFlore ought to be noted—I would be happy if they named the Government Plaza the LeFlore Plaza. [Laughter] I think that sounds good: the J.L. LeFlore Plaza.

B: That does sound good. I like that. Is there anything else that I haven't asked that will help to better understand John LeFlore and his role in the Civil Rights Movement? Anything that I haven't touched on?

R: Well, I think in due time, I think we have a lot of people writing. I certainly have written my new book here—and I don't want to try to steal any time, but what I'm saying about that is that all of the major Supreme Court cases that affected us is in my book. Every one of them: *Brown v. Board of Education*; *Plessy v. Ferguson*; the cities case; *Birdie Mae Davis*; all of those cases. I put them in there so the people could see what Mr. LeFlore had done. The hard time he had, and the struggle we had in trying to be included. So, I included—so, I think when people get through reading all of this, I think they can see him for—I think they can see through all of that Uncle Tom stuff, and I think they can see him for who he really was. I think they can see him for who he really was.

B: What's the name of your book?

R: *The Genesis and the Exodus of NOW*. Sheila, I had to put that in! [Laughter] I can hold it up to you.

B: That's good. I really appreciate your time. There's something else I was going to ask you, too; it's along the Civil Rights thing. Oh boy, I can't--can you turn it off for a second?

[End of recording]

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