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**JLFC 001A John L. LeFlore**  
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**Interviewed by Margaret Laverne and Melton McLaurin on July 3, 1970**  
**22 minute audio recording • 5 page transcript**

**Abstract:** In this recording, John L. LeFlore is interviewed by Margaret Laverne and Melton McLaurin to discuss the Civil Rights Movement and the history of Mobile, Alabama. The interview begins with Mr. LeFlore's reflections on the racism and racial violence that he grew up with in the US South, motivating him to co-found the Mobile branch of the NAACP in 1925. He also offers some thoughts on the importance of allyship to the success of the Movement, and the changes he has observed—and worked for—over the years.

This collection includes several interviews intended to provide deeper context to Mr. LeFlore's papers, which he donated as a manuscript collection to the University of South Alabama.

**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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**JLFC 001A John L. LeFlore**  
Interviewed July 3, 1970

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.

This interview was transcribed by:

Draft transcript:	unknown
Audit-edit:	Ryan Morini, July 6, 2022
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JLFC 001A

Interviewee: John L. LeFlore

Interviewers: Margaret LaVorne and Melton McLaurin

Date: July 3, 1970

M: This is an introduction to an oral history project carried on by the University of South Alabama Department of History. This project is to supplement and add to information contained in a collection of manuscripts at the University of South Alabama's library, donated by the local chapter of the NAACP. These records begin in August of 1938, and continue through 1962. This material is primarily material of the local branch of the NAACP. It also includes various manuscripts, letters, publications, from branch and national offices of that organization. Also included in the collection is material of other civil rights organizations, particularly the Non-Partisan Voters League. Most of the material from the Non-Partisan Voters League dates from the early 1960s. Much of the material is also in the form of personal correspondence between Mr. John LeFlore, who was the executive secretary of the local chapter of the NAACP—that is, the Mobile chapter of the NAACP—and was also chairman of the Southern Regional Conference of the NAACP for several years during the 1950s, the early 1950s. Mr. LeFlore has also served as the Director of Casework for the Non-Partisan Voters League from 1960 until the present, the present date being July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1970. Much of the material, then, will be in the form of correspondence between Mr. LeFlore and various and sundry civil rights organizations; heads of transportation organizations—railways, bus companies, and so forth; other governmental agencies; and any number of other correspondence. So—also, there is some material that is extremely hard to classify; it's really neither the material of the Non-Partisan Voters League or the NAACP, but includes private correspondence of people writing to Mr. LeFlore, sometimes as a well-known individual civil rights worker. Sometimes it's a member of either of the two organizations. The material amounts to approximately ten lineal feet of boxed documents. Persons working on this project are: myself, Dr. Melton McLaurin, assistant professor of history at the University of South Alabama; BS and MA, East Carolina College, 1962 and 1963 respectively; PhD in American History from University of South Carolina, 1967. The other persons working on the project will now identify themselves on tape.

ML: I'm Margaret Laverne, a student assistant working on the project with Dr. McLaurin and John LeFlore. I will do most of the questioning of Mr. LeFlore in future sessions about the material in the files.

JL: My name is John L. LeFlore. I'm a native Mobilian, and I have lived here, lived in Mobile, practically all of my life. I was born some years after the turn of the century, and have witnessed what appears to me to be significant change in the economic and social strata of American life. We have also witnessed some very important

changes in race relations. At the time that I was born, and for a long period thereafter, as an example, lynchings were a pastime in our country—especially in the Deep South, where it was not unusual for the state to lynch as many as 75 or 100 blacks a year in one of the Southern states. And I do recall that it has not been so long in the past that a woman was lynched from a bridge at Shubuta, Mississippi. This struggle has been most significant I believe, when one retrospects, and can see the contrast that exists in our country today. I was educated in the public schools of Mobile, under trying circumstances again. Later in life, I was able to go to college at night. And my other education was acquired, if I may class it as such, by extension work with the University of Chicago at a time that institution was offering such opportunity to students who could not do residential work. At an early age, I became interested in the NAACP. This developed because of an incident that occurred here on a city street car, when I had an unfortunate fistcuff with a white person that was not provoked by me. But being young, and perhaps willing to meet any kind of challenge at that time, when I was set upon by the gentleman, I responded in a like manner. And I think he was worsened in the brawl. Both of us were arrested; he was released on his own recognition, and I had to stay in jail until someone came to sign my bond. At that particular time—it was in the [19]20s—the Ku Klux Klan was a power not only in the South, but in other parts of the nation as well. The Klan was running rampant in Alabama, and it was during the term of Governor Bibb Graves. Of course, there are some certain rumors that persons in high political office in Alabama were very friendly to the Klan, and that you had to belong to the Klan back in that day in order to hold certain state jobs. That did instill in me not necessarily fear, but a feeling of apprehension that I needed to align myself with some protective organization, or some organization that had as its motives, or its designs, the protection of the rights of minority people. And the NAACP was my choice. Along with Mr. W.L. Bolden and Mr. Bibb Johnson, we founded the NAACP in Mobile in 1925 and made it an important factor, not only in the life of Black people in Mobile, but throughout the state and throughout the South. We were interested primarily, just as people are today, in the question of opening jobs, of social justice, equal education, and the other facets of public life which are important to all people in their struggle upward for equality under the law. We had difficult problems, as I mentioned—oh, incidentally, may I state that I was executive secretary of the Mobile branch of the NAACP, from the time we founded it in 1925 until it was put under injunction by then-Attorney General John Patterson, later Governor of Alabama, in 1956. When the NAACP returned to the scene locally and throughout the state of Alabama in 1964, we did not—I did not actively participate in it, because we were doing similar

work through the Non-Partisan Voter's League and the Citizen's Committee. As we mentioned a little while ago, there were difficult problems—and of course, you have some difficult problems now facing Blacks, but not nearly the same kind of situations that you had 30 or 40 years ago. As an example, we had a dual system of laws that were almost inflexible. It was one kind of justice for whites, and another kind for Blacks. And whites generally back in that day were intransigent in their viewpoint on the race question. Those who showed any degree of moderation were usually classed as Negro-lovers, and they were strongly ostracized in white society. So as a consequence, you had only a few white people who were willing to speak out. And we believe that much of the change that has been brought about in recent years has not only been viewed to what we class as aggressiveness among Blacks—because Blacks have always shown an aggressiveness; perhaps not to the same degree, but you have found folk who have always believed in freedom, who've always been willing to stand up and even die for it. And what we believe makes the difference now is that you find many whites who share the same point that Blacks have today, and 30 or 40 years ago you just didn't find those people; or the few that were on the scene were afraid to speak out. Blacks, in our judgement, must not forget that they have not carried the ball alone in the last 10 years, which have perhaps registered the more significant changes. One cannot forget that Andy Goodman and Mike Schwerner died with James Chaney out at Philadelphia, Mississippi for Black freedom. And Andy Goodman and Mike Schwerner were white. We cannot forget that in the early [19]60s, less than 10 years ago, that whites joined by the hundreds, or thousands, in helping Blacks to achieve a better stance in American society. For any of the Blacks today, including myself—if I were to be that ridiculous in my viewpoint to say that we've done all of this alone, certainly does not represent the truth, and it is a reflection, we would think, more on emotionalism than it would be on fact. Throughout this nation's history, whites have helped, and whether we wish to admit it or not, much of what transpired to bring on the Civil War was due to the question of slavery. Now, in 1937 as an example about the educational situation in Alabama, this state was spending only 29 cents for the education of a Black child for every dollar spent for the education of a white child. However, it appeared that when Blacks could not measure arms with Whites in a competitive status in our society, of course the Blacks were branded as being inferior—inherently so, when it is our judgment such is not true. We did take an active part in trying to bring about a change in the educational system in Alabama. And in 1941, we were given—I'm sorry, I should say “I,” because—and I do owe my listeners an apology—because I have such an abhorrence for the word “I” that I usually say “we” when I mean “I.” In 1941, I was

given an award at the NAACP national conference in Houston as one of the 10 persons in the United States who had done more for civil rights in a given year. That was at the NAACP national convention. The award was given by Walter White. In 1946, at Cleveland, the National Alliance of Postal Employees bestowed a similar award on me and Heman Marion Sweatt—who was the author, we may say, of the University of Texas case—for being the two postal employees who had done most for civil rights in the United States. In 1953, the Mobile branch of the NAACP won an outstanding award at the NAACP convention in St. Louis for its significant contributions in the Civil Rights struggle. And so it has been throughout the years, that we have attempted to do our bit, and we've done our bit—the Black people have—under most trying circumstances. Mobile has made a significant contribution. Very few of the people would know that some of the changes that have been brought about in the South were brought about through cases that were handled by the Mobile branch of the NAACP, and the Southern Regional Conference of branches under my leadership—or, under my *direction*—I have a repugnance for the word “leadership”—under my direction at the time that I was chairman of the Southern Conference of NAACP branches. This has been an important struggle. It has been not without, we would say, blood, the shedding of blood; has not been without persecution. But nevertheless, the gains that have been made have surely justified whatever sacrifice that any individual may have given for this particular cause. Other positions that I have held in addition to my NAACP connection: said I was staff writer, staff correspondent, for the *Chicago Defender* for 10 years; was also staff correspondent for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. I worked for the *Chicago Defender* from the period 1942 to 1952. I worked for the *Pittsburgh Courier* for five years of that period. In other words, I was staff correspondent for the two newspapers. During that same period, I would sometimes write articles for the newspaper *PM* that existed at that time, and was regarded as one of the liberal newspapers of the nation. *PM* was a tabloid which was printed in New York. I have written stories for the *Crisis* magazine. I am presently the associate editor of the *Mobile Beacon*, and also a freelance writer. I am a member of the Mobile Housing Board, whose term will expire in August of 1970. I went on the Housing Board in the fall of 1966. I'm a member of the Alabama State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights. I'm also a member of the Alabama State Comprehensive Health Council. I am a former postal employee; incidentally, I'm retired at this time. Retired under pressure because of my civil rights work, before reaching the maximum retirement age. I was a postal employee, believe it or not, for 40 years. I went into the post office at an early age. I am also a radio commentator having my own program known as

“Today's World,” which considers social and economic problems, and where we have a discussion on other controversial subjects. At the present time, “Today's World” is a public service program of radio station WMOO. It did not originate with this particular station, but it is now a part of their public service format. I have covered investigations for various agencies, and two years ago I served on a regional committee for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to discuss health problems in the city of Atlanta. We have—I have given time to almost any kind of public request that has been made of me in connection with surveys, one of which we just *recently* made concerning—and I don't *want*, I should not like to get chronologically *ahead* of my story—but one which we recently made in connection with the matter of white doctors who maintain segregated waiting room facilities for Black patients. This survey of course covered five states, and it came up with an astounding kind of report that more than 2000 of such doctors in five states still maintain segregated waiting rooms, or refuse to serve Black patients at all. It is an indication that we still have a long way to go in our race relations. And we're still—I'm still active; in fact, we have a rating of doing more civil rights work today than any organization in the state of Alabama. In many circles, such as newspapers circles and government circles, our office is regarded as a source of statistical information which reflects that we are felt to be quite confident in discussing questions involving civil rights.

M: This is the end of this particular taping session.  
[End of recording]

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