

**JLFC 001C John L. LeFlore
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Interviewed by Melton McLaurin on December 15, 1970
44 minute audio recording • 10 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 observing that African Americans could not take city and county civil service examinations in Mobile County, unconstitutionally limiting their employment options. He relates the work that he and other activists undertook to establish more equitable hiring practices and access to training opportunities, particularly in Mobile. Mr. LeFlore also discusses his work with the Mobile Housing Board, and describes what he views as the benefits of urban renewal to the Black community as well as some negative impacts, and the challenges of attempting to improve Black people's access to better housing in the face of white flight. He offers some observations on the food stamp program, and some ruminations on the effects of the gubernatorial administration of George Wallace in Alabama.

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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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:

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JLFC 001C

Interviewee: John L. LeFlore

Interviewers: Melton McLaurin

Date: December 15, 1970

M: Continuing taping J. L. LeFlore, Mr. LeFlore's comments on the NAACP papers and race relations in Mobile. This session is being taped December the 15th of 1970. Mr. LeFlore, I'd like to ask you a question today, continuing from the last taping session, in the economic sphere. I understand that in the past it was quite different for Blacks to be employed in civil service, and that it took suits in the federal court in an attempt to get civil service positions open to Blacks, and that a great deal of this type activity began somewhere around 1950. Would you care to comment on the employment of Blacks in the civil service system in Mobile from roughly that date?

L: Dr. McLaurin, it may surprise the people of the new generation—if we may class our young people as such—to know that just 20 years ago, Black people were not permitted to take city and county civil service examinations in Mobile and Mobile County. During the postwar period of World War II, we had a number of young men coming back who certainly felt that their sacrifices—which may have involved the giving of their lives, and in some instances it did result in the giving of some men's lives—who felt that they were entitled, rightfully so, to the enjoyment of all the opportunities that our country afforded to any of its citizens. We were able to induce several of these young men to apply under our direction for applications, at the time that the city of Mobile advertised for policemen—or, for police officers. You may be surprised today to know that, just 20 years ago, in an instance of examinations for police officers, that advertisements always said "white only" and of course had the other stipulations that would be reasonably required. The same thing was true about firefighters, clerks, and city or county government, or whatever the job may have been, the job that was open, if it happened to have been under civil service. We had three young men to apply, in writing, for the right to take the examination for police officer. This application signed by the three was presented to the Mobile County Personnel Board. The Board did not open the examination to them, and in a subsequent action we sued in the federal district court here on the grounds that this was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. We were, in *our* judgment, certain of victory; it so happened that our attorney failed to provide as exhibit A or B a copy of the application that had been filed with the Mobile County Personnel Board. This cannot be proved, and perhaps we may be unethical in making this projection 20 years late, but it appeared to us that the court was looking for some technicality on which it could reject the suit and throw it out of court. The technicality was provided when our attorney failed, as we said a moment ago, to offer as an exhibit a copy of the application that the young men

had filed. It appeared that their oral testimony to the effect that they had filed such an application was completely ignored by the court.

M: Mr. LeFlore, in that court case, did the city contend that the individuals in question had not in fact filed an application?

L: Yes, Dr. McLaurin. The city did contend that, despite the rebuttal offered orally by the three plaintiffs. That was disregarded, and the federal judge ruled against us on the ground that there was insufficient evidence to sustain the contention that these people had been denied the right to take the civil service examination. Well, one could well understand the consternation that gripped us after this defeat, and we were trying to rally our forces together to make another assault on the citadel of racial proscription. It so happened that in 1953, a clean sweep was made at City Hall, and the newly-elected commissioners were: Joseph N. Langan, Charles Hackmeyer, and Henry Luscher Sr. The first day that Mr. Langan and Mr. Luscher were in public office, they went before the Mobile County Personnel Board and had all of the racial restrictions removed which had previously denied Black American citizens the right to take civil service examinations, to which they were rightfully entitled to participate as taxpayers and citizens of the city of Mobile and Mobile County. Mr. Langan and Mr. Luscher's move resulted in widespread opportunities being made available for Blacks under the Mobile County Civil Service system. The next move by the Mobile City Commission under Mr. Langan's direction was the employment of Black police officers. And we understand today that the city of Mobile has more police officers of color than any other city in the state of Alabama. It was also difficult at one time, believe it or not, for Blacks to take federal civil service examinations. In the [19]30s and the late [19]20s, Blacks in many instances were not able to take examinations for the Mobile Post Office or for the Prichard Post Office. Several times, we had to file complaints with federal authorities in Washington against the rigid discrimination which existed that kept Blacks from becoming even letter carriers here. And over a period of 25 years, we never had a single Black clerk in the Mobile Post Office—a single *new* Black clerk. We had one. Of course, that was all we had for a period of approximately 25 years. The matter of breaking down discrimination, as we said, even in the federal civil service required quite a bit of effort: the enlistment of help from national organizations like the National Alliance of Postal Employees; and direct petition, through the National Association for the Advance of Colored People, to the Post Office Department in Washington. Any number of investigations were made, and in each instance, there was what we would regard as a whitewash. Finally, a Southerner headed up an investigation, a man by the name of Lawhorn out of the state of Tennessee. Mr. Lawhorn discovered widespread discrimination

against Blacks with regard to examinations for post office clerks. He found that there were men like Walter Samples, who's now a supervisor in the Mobile Post Office, and who had a grade of 106; 96 on his written test, and 10 percent for veterans' disability. And there were others who had grades that should've entitled them to—admitted employment to vacancies that existed, and that the Mobile Post Office, with the Civil Service Commission condoning what had happened, denying these persons employment for no other reason than the fact that they were Black. As a result of Mr. Lawhorn's sweeping investigation, six Black clerks were employed. As we said, it was the first time in 25 years that there had been a new Negro or Black clerk in the post office; and as we previously mentioned, the number had declined to one up until the time that this breakthrough was made under the direction of the Civil Service Commission through Mr. Lawhorn of Tennessee.

M: Mr. LeFlore, about the same time that efforts were being made to open up federal civil service, and particularly city civil service here in Mobile in the early 1950s, there was an attempt also made to obtain employment for Blacks in the state civil service system, particularly the liquor stores which were state-run. In 1952, there was an effort in August of 1952, to open up civil service employment in the liquor stores for Blacks. Would you care to comment on that, the state civil service system as opposed to the city civil service system, and the difficulty of Blacks being hired there?

L: Dr. McLaurin, there seemed to have been a pattern to deny Blacks the right to take these examinations—or the right to employment even if the examinations happened to have been open to them—in city and county, and state positions. We attempted to break down the barrier with regard to state employment by first singling out the alcohol beverage control stores which we observed Blacks were spending a lot of money in. We also noted that there was not a single Black person working as a clerk in any of those stores. They had Black porters, but that was as far as the employment opportunity prevailed. We had learned that the state was very cleverly—if a Black person happened to have been one of the three highest persons, of course that could easily be circumvented, and we understand it was circumvented, by taking one of the two remaining white persons. Finally, we decided to try to get several Blacks to take the examination, including my own son of who, of course, did not wish to have such employment, but he decided to take the examination for the purpose of trying to open opportunities for Black people. My son, William, at that time, held a master's degree, and of course afterwards he went on to get his doctorate degree in biology at the University of Southern California. But at that time, he held a master's degree, and he took the examination

merely for the purpose of trying to help open an employment opportunity for Blacks which had been wrongfully denied. We were also able to get another citizen by the name of Major Madison to take the examination, and several others. But it appeared that our efforts went for naught. No employment was made available to Black people in the alcoholic beverage control stores, and as far as we know, there is no widespread employment open for them, for Black people, in the stores as of *now*. Perhaps in 1970, the fault could lie in part with the Black people. We don't know. Maybe they are not interested in such employment. But we are going to make another effort to renew the campaign for employment of Blacks, not only as clerks in so-called liquor stores, but we are going to make an effort to open employment to them in any capacity that we feel they may be qualified to serve.

M: Mr. LeFlore, in your last answer you indicated that you do not feel that state civil service positions are open to Blacks; certainly not within the alcoholic beverage stores in town, and in other state positions. What do you feel about the ability of Blacks to obtain jobs in the Mobile civil service system at this time, at the present?

L: We feel that a large number of Blacks may be qualified to take city and county civil service examinations. We have found in making a survey that many of the whites holding positions in the city and county governments have no more than a high school education, and I think the community read just a few days ago where a gentleman holding a very important position in the city government had only a seventh-grade education. This is not being said as a matter of being unfair to the person or anything of that sort; it is being expressed to point out just what does happen, and just what in many instances may shape up to be gross injustices based entirely on race or color. There are young Black women, young Black men, who are qualified to hold any number of jobs in city government, and also over in the county courthouse. But because, we suspect, of the unwritten law that would deprive them of this employment because they are Black, that many of them have been refused jobs despite their qualifications. There is a strong suspicion also that the Mobile County Personnel Board has been employing devious means, especially on the question of interview, to deprive Black persons who are qualified to hold city and county positions above that of the most menial jobs—have been denied that right because, as we said a moment ago, that certain means that are not, in our judgment, up to Hoyle, or being utilized to keep them out of employment. This particular question will be attacked when the police integration suit goes to court in the early part of 1971. This is an important part of the overall case because Blacks in the police department—only one Black is a sergeant. Although we have a number of Blacks who say they are college men, and they can rise no higher than patrolman first class, is an indication, we suspect, that some steps are being

used that are not consistent with ethics in civil service, to keep these Black people out of jobs.

M: One of the real problems among urban Blacks is a problem of housing, since blacks are usually—and particularly in most areas of the South, and it's certainly in most areas nationally as well, however—large numbers of Blacks are in low-income levels. Housing has been difficult to find; inadequate. Some federal programs, urban redevelopment programs and urban renewal programs, have been advanced as ways to save the center city and ways to develop housing. But it's also been attacked, because persons have felt that urban development has simply meant the condemning of existing low-income housing, and the land taken over and used for commercial developments, and no public housing built to meet the needs of those people who have in effect been driven out of their homes by urban redevelopment or urban renewal funds. There are several urban renewal projects in Mobile, and I wonder if you would comment on the housing situation for Blacks in Mobile as you see it, and on the effects of these urban redevelopment programs on housing for urban Blacks.

L: Dr. McLaurin, this particular question has its pros and cons. I think you very correctly stated that the housing is designed for the purpose of alleviating problems among low-income people, especially among Blacks, and at the same time there is a segment of thinking throughout the nation that urban renewal and public housing are not the real answers to the problems of housing for low-income people. However, we would feel, having served on the Mobile Housing Board for almost five years, and having attended various seminars throughout the country on the question of housing for low-income people, that while urban renewal and public housing are not regarded as a panacea for housing ills affecting low-income people, low-income people—especially Black people—have been helped tremendously. Because there is an urban renewal and a public housing program to take them out of rat-infested ghettos, and put them into housing that is decent, and will meet the need, to a large extent, of people who must be renters for a long period of time. On the other side of the coin, urban renewal and public housing, the two together, have dispossessed a number of people from their homes and have caused them to move to other areas. Urban renewal and public housing have to a certain extent continued a segregated ghetto for Black people. There are those in the Black community who feel that—well, regardless of the number of Blacks who may move into a public housing project, that that should be done. That is, that they should take 60 or 70 percent, if necessary, and that through some means you will be able to maintain an integrated project. But human beings being what they are, if we're going to look at this question pragmatically, when Blacks move in to

an extent of about 40 percent, whether it's in schools or housing or anywhere else, the other people move out and the effort to integrate is stultified—not because it's morally right that the other people should move out, but because we must recognize that many people are prejudiced, many people are prejudiced, and many people would be willing to attend a school or to stay in a certain neighborhood if the Black ratio were about four to six; that when it gets any larger than that, they decide to do otherwise. It remains a problem to the housing authority as to what figure could be reached that would provide a satisfactory solution to this particular problem. By and large, Black people have benefitted by urban renewal and public housing. On the other hand, they have suffered because of urban renewal and public housing dispossessing them from their modest homes in some instances; in other instances, from homes that probably deserved to be condemned and razed. But nevertheless, those dwellings were their homes, and they had a certain attachment for the particular neighborhoods in which they lived. Recently, the National Housing Authority has made some arrangement to supplement the appraised value of a piece of property with a grant that would enable the person dispossessed to buy a better home than the one from which he or she would be divested. This question, as we said a moment ago, could be—we feel that it could be argued both ways. But by and large, we say again that Blacks have benefitted by urban renewal and public housing. The average percentage of income for public housing in Mobile is 20 percent; it's 20 percent of the total income of a family comprises the rent cost. As an example, if a family has a total income of 200 dollars, the family pays 40 dollars a month rent. And of course, that includes utilities such as water, gas, and electricity, up to a certain maximum. At the time I served on the Housing Board, we attempted to—or, I attempted to have the rent reduced to 15 percent of a person's income, but that was felt to be not feasible by the other Housing Board commissioners or the administrative staff. Now, under the Green Amendment, a person can be charged no more than 25 percent of his income for rent, with certain modifications. That 25 percent, with these modifications, may not result in any further taxation on a family's income than the 20 percent that the Mobile Housing Board now exacts without certain modifications. But in the four and a half years, almost five years, that this person was on the Housing Board, he was convinced that urban renewal and public housing have brought many advantages to Black low-income people—and to many of the white low-income people. On the other hand, the urban renewal and public housing have, together, in dispossessing people from their homes, brought a number of inconveniences.

M: [No audio at first]—throughout the South has racial implications; that is, the tax structure is such that it puts the brunt of the burden on the working man, the lower socioeconomic class whites and the Blacks. Two instances in Mobile come to

mind: the first is the fact that in the past three years, the citizens of Mobile County have three times voted down a proposition to increase property taxation to support indigent care for patients through the Mobile General Hospital. And just recently, and that is in the summer and fall of 1970, the Mobile City Commission has refused to contribute more than 40,000 dollars to the food stamp program, when evidently welfare officials in Mobile feel that a great need for increased contributions from the city for the food stamp program does exist. Do you feel that these two incidents reflect racial animosities, and if so, do you feel that there are other economic or tax problems—not economic per se, but tax problems—that reflect racial animosities within the society in general?

L: Dr. McLaurin, there seems to be a consensus, especially in the Black community, that the defeat of the ad valorem measure for the Mobile General Hospital was racially motivated. In the first instance, Blacks helped to defeat the tax measure themselves. It was very unfortunate. There were two or three persons who had some political influence in the county who attempted to give nightmarish pictures about what would happen to Black people, and to their property, if they supported this tax measure to help Mobile General Hospital. On the other hand, you had whites who looked at this question simply from a racial standpoint, and they too were opposed to any increase in the ad valorem tax for the Mobile General Hospital. This was in the first instance of a referendum; and the two, one complemented the other, and they defeated the effort to get the Mobile General Hospital out of the muck and mire. In the second and third instance, the defeat came primarily from propaganda put out from the white community that only Blacks would benefit in a major way from the upgrading of Mobile General Hospital. Of course, this is not true that the ratio—I think we are correctly stating it when we said the ratio of patients at Mobile General Hospital is about 40 percent white or thereabout, and 60 percent black or thereabout. So, whites have been unfair to other whites when they defeated the last two referendums primarily on the race question. Now about the food stamp program. Many people were disappointed that the City of Mobile failed to provide the other 43,000 dollars that had been requested to help put the food stamp program within the reach of practically all the people who would need such assistance. When you consider the increasing unemployment problem in the Mobile area, due to several causes, we are going to have an increasing demand for help by low-income people from a food stamp program. We understand by an investigation that was made, that about 400 new applicants a month are demanding aid or help through the food stamp program. And of course, the Mobile County Department of Pensions and Security has not been able to provide adequate help to these people, and there's reason to believe that many a child goes to bed hungry nights in Mobile County—and a large number

of adults—because of the inadequacy of our food stamp program. Some citizens who were interested in this matter had figured that the City of Mobile would gain more than 43,000 dollars in sales tax if it had helped to provide an adequate program for the entire county. Now, in talking about sales tax, as to whether or not the refusal of the City of Mobile to grant the additional 43,000 dollars for the food stamp program was racially-inspired or motivated, is a question of conjecture in the community today. There are those who have a degree of sensitivity about what goes on in the maneuvering of our political power structure, who feel that it was racially-motivated, and that there is little sympathy in some quarters for the poor people, especially poor people who happen to be Black. And that this is, among many people, regarded as a factor in the rejection of the request for 43,000 dollars more to help provide Mobile County with the kind of food stamp program that would reach practically all of the people who may be in need of such assistance. Now, on the question of our tax structure: the sales tax, of course, which has been adopted in several Southern states—

- M: The sales tax to which you're referring is the fact that the state of Alabama has a four cent on the dollar sales tax, which is an across-the-board tax, except for so-called big ticket items such as houses and automobiles and so forth; and also, that the city of Mobile has a two percent sales tax for all sales in the county, again, all across-the-board tax, except for the major items such as automobiles and so forth. Is this correct?
- L: That is correct, Dr. McLaurin. And such tax hurts the poorer person, the person at the bottom rung of the economic and social ladder, far more than it does the person who may be regarded as reflecting a middle-income family. There is a recent article in a magazine about the tax structure in the South being aimed primarily at making the poor poorer, and in some instances making the rich richer. The sales tax that has been adopted as a means of revenue in several of the Southern states—I don't know how many at the moment, but I think in most of the Southern states—is regarded as a very serious iniquity that deprives poor people of an equality in image before their own governments—that is, their city and state governments—where income is involved, and where the tax structure works a greater detriment to them than methods that are employed in other parts of the country to bring in revenue to sustain governments, whether they are city, county, or state.
- M: Let me ask you before we go—we're going to have to close the taping session in just a minute, because I know you have to get back—but let me ask you if you feel that since Governor Wallace will return to the governor's mansion in January of

1971, what you feel the next four years in Alabama will hold for Black citizens—and particularly for the Black citizens of Mobile—under the Wallace administration.

L: You perhaps recognize the fact, Dr. McLaurin, that Mobile County just about gave Governor-elect Wallace his margin of victory over Governor Brewer. It was rather astounding and regarded as paradoxical in many quarters, because Mobile County had boasted about its broad concepts with regard to human dignity, and with regard to economic and social problems affecting the people of Alabama. However, where politics may be involved, the people of Mobile County seemed to have followed a very conservative trend, and that is more or less true in all of the elections that are held in Mobile County. Now, Governor-elect Wallace, having the news report which indicated that he had an emissary at the Ku Klux Klan “klanvocation,” I think it was called, held in Tuscaloosa several weeks ago, certainly did not cause many people to lose their suspicions that a Wallace administration may not always represent the best interest of all the people of the state of Alabama. Now, there are those who would strongly rebut the information that has been disseminated, to effect that because of Mr. Wallace’s very acrimonious attacks against what he called the federal bureaucracy during his previous administration, that the Brookley Air Force Base was phased out. However, there are those who are very close in government who have said that Governor-elect Wallace’s very strong indignation, expressed indignation, against the authority of the federal government was one of the factors that led to the federal government under the Johnson administration deciding to close out Brookley Air Force Base. There are people in Alabama today—we just returned from two trips recently—who look with misgivings on a new Wallace Administration. We are hoping and praying that the gentleman will not follow the Machiavellian philosophy of doing the thing that he feels will enhance his prestige—or, further doing that sort of thing—at the expense of the people of Alabama. But many people in Alabama are keeping their fingers crossed, because they’re wondering if we will have a new Wallace, or whether this will be a symbol of the Wallace we had whose tirades against federal authority, whose subtle appeals to racial prejudice, brought about almost twelve unnecessary deaths during the four years of his previous administration; deaths of people who were bent on trying to make conditions better for all Alabamians, like Reverend James Reeb, Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, and then about the four children who were killed in the bombing of a Birmingham church, and numbers of others who met tragic deaths that could be traced indirectly to the venom and the subtle hatred that the man at the helm of the state of Alabama preached during his previous administration as governor of this state.

M: All right. Thank you very much, Mr. LeFlore, And that concludes the taping session of December 15—

[End of recording]

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