

**JLFC 001D John L. LeFlore
John LeFlore Collection (JLFC), Acc. 270
Interviewed by Melton McLaurin on October 9, 1972
33 minute audio recording • 9 page transcript**

Abstract: In this recording, John L. LeFlore is interviewed by Melton McLaurin to discuss the Civil Rights Movement and the history of Mobile, Alabama. The interview begins with Mr. LeFlore discussing his activities with the Mobile branch of the NAACP in the 1940s, including the fight to create equal work training opportunities during wartime, and racial equality in voter registration.

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 001D

Interviewee: John L. LeFlore

Interviewer: Melton McLaurin

Date: October 9, 1972

M: [Audio cuts in]—McLaurin, Department of History, University of South Alabama, and it is being taped at a low tape speed. Can you hear? Can you hear it? It is a speed—[Break in recording]—an effort that took place, a successful effort that took place in 1947 to equalize salaries paid to Black and white school teachers who held the same professional qualifications, the same degree status. I understand that Joseph Langan, who was then a state senator from Mobile County, and who was himself—if I'm not mistaken—a returned veteran, and who was white, was instrumental in working to get this equalization. And I also understand that the Mobile chapter of the NAACP was quite active in this. Would you comment on your role, the Mobile NAACP's role; and also at the end of your specific comments about these efforts, could you say if, in your opinion, the efforts or desires of returning veterans had anything to do with the push that was made immediately after the war to obtain an equalization in salaries.

L: Dr. McLaurin, at that particular time in the year 1947, the NAACP Mobile Branch was headed by W. L. Bolden, and B. G. Johnson, and J. L. LeFlore. At that time, I was the executive secretary. It was through the efforts of my office that a seven-point civil rights petition was filed with the Mobile County Legislative Delegation for a meeting in the old courthouse building. Attorney Joe Langan was the only state senator from Mobile County at that time. So, Mr. Langan as state senator from this particular county had very much—I would say potent—power with regard to legislation that affected Mobile County. You had three members of the House at that time, and one was, that I can remember, was Attorney George Stone—who is also still living. I've forgotten the names of the other two. But we presented this petition to the legislative delegation in a meeting open to the public at the old Mobile County Courthouse building. This petition asked, among other things, for equal education opportunities for Blacks, at the secondary level and also at the college level. We also asked for equal teachers' salaries for Black teachers of Mobile County. It so happened that the legislative delegation questioned us quite closely with regard to equal teachers' salaries, and in relation thereto, we also asked for a reduction of the pupil load of Black teachers. Black teachers at that time had, in some instances, as much as twice as many students in numbers as white teachers. So, the legislative delegation questioned us quite closely. A copy of the petition was presented to each member of the delegation. We were able to very truthfully and authentically point out that Black teachers were receiving just a little more than half the salary of white teachers, and at the same time they had a much heavier pupil load. I can well remember that Senator Langan had little to say at that particular meeting. But two days later, he made a public declaration that he

would not vote for another penny's tax for the Mobile County Public School system until it equalized the salaries of white and Black teachers. Of course, that fell like a bombshell on the community. It was certainly surprising to Black people that he would take such a forthright stand back in that day, and it was shocking to the white people, to the white community, that he would go all out—if we may use the vernacular of the streets—for justice for Black teachers. As a consequence of his action, the Mobile County Public School system began an equalization of salaries for white and Black teachers, to bring the Black teachers up to parity with the white teachers. I do recall that, as an example, Mrs. Florence Howard, who was then a principal at Caldwell School, mentioned that her salary was increased 700 dollars a year as a result of Mr. Langan's very bold and courageous stand. However, there were repercussions in store for Joe Langan. When he ran for re-election, he was overwhelmingly defeated by Attorney Tom Johnston, who used the race question and Mr. Langan's fair position toward Blacks to defeat him.

M: Was this election the following year in 1948, or do you recall?

L: The election was not the following year, because I recall in the following year Joe Langan took a very firm stand against the Boswell Amendment, which came into being after the outlawing of the white primary—not necessarily the outlawing of the white primary in Alabama, but outlawing of the white primary by the Supreme Court in *Smith vs. Allwright* in Texas.

M: Could you comment on—you said two of the things that you asked were: one, equalization of salaries; two, equalization of higher educational opportunities; three, equalization of the number of pupils in the classroom. Can you think of any other of the seven points that you asked for to the Mobile School Board?

[Mr. LeFlore's response was not recorded.]

M: [Audio cuts in]—the admission of Blacks to a welding school. Would you care to comment on that in a little more detail if possible?

L: Dr. McLaurin, there was a rigid system of segregation and discrimination against Blacks in almost every facet of public life in the early [19]40s during the war, and despite the fact that the Japanese and the Germans were sinking our ships at a very rapid rate, there were those among the whites whose prejudice was so rigid, so strongly embedded, that they did not want Blacks to have any kind of a training that would prepare them for skilled jobs. We especially remember the situation with regard to a man who was the vocational coordinator here at that time, and whose

office was located in the Mobile County Public School building. He worked for the—they were using federal funds, and I don't know as to whether he was working for the school board—his office was located in the school board building on Government Street—but they were very definitely using federal funds, and the program was being sponsored primarily with federal money. But Mr. Ward took a very firm stand against training Blacks for skilled work. We, by almost constantly protesting to the War Manpower Commission in Washington, we were able to have that condition corrected—at least to the point that a welding school was established for Blacks on a segregated basis at the foot of Government Street. And it was from that school that Henry Williams, who is now the welding instructor at Carver State School, got his training; and I think he will readily tell the public if asked that it was through the efforts of some certain people, John LeFlore and others, that he was able to get that training. Hundreds of Blacks were trained for welding at the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company, and those that were unable to get jobs at Alabama, they were sent to Sun Shipbuilding Company at Chester, Pennsylvania, and they worked in skilled jobs up there.

M: Mr. LeFlore, in general during the war years, during the 1940s and the immediate post-war years—say, until 1948—when you or other members of the Black community sought to obtain aid, where did you turn to? I've noticed that during the war years you referred to the War Manpower Commission and writing the War Manpower Commission; I've noticed that in 1947 you did go to the Mobile County Delegation. In general, did you find that you had to turn to federal sources, outside sources, to try to achieve a degree of equality in educational facilities and in other facilities, or did you feel that you could talk to the delegation prior to 1947 or 1948—the county delegation, that is? Could you answer that question please?

L: Dr. McLaurin, it all depended upon in which area you were working. Of course, where federal programs were concerned as it related to industry, we felt that the better result could be achieved by going directly to the federal government. In instances of education, we started with the local people in seeking remedy, and of course if that had failed, we were going to institute legal action in the federal courts to try to bring about desirable change. As is known in 1947, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* was about seven years away, and there had been no set precedent by the Supreme Court with regard to equal educational opportunities. But this was an action that we took because we felt it was our only hope at that time to try to get a bad condition remedied. And that is why we went to the Mobile County Legislative Delegation.

- M: Mr. LeFlore, if I could, I'd like to change the subject to voter registration. In previous tapings, we've discussed the situation that existed in 1944, when for all practical purposes in Mobile County, Blacks were simply not allowed to vote except in the general election—and that very few even voted in the general election. Because of the white primary laws, no Blacks—as I understand it—voted in the Democratic primaries in Mobile. Now in 1944, in the May Primary, you, along with a number of other leaders of the Black community, after the ruling in the *Smith v. Allwright* case the previous year, in which the Supreme Court had outlawed the white primary in Texas, you and a group of leaders from the Black community went to the polling places and requested the right to vote. You were registered at that time, I guess. I'd like you to comment on that situation. I know you were denied the right to vote, do you recall: A, if you were registered; B, being denied the right to vote; and C, what the immediate response was in the Black community after the denial to vote. Was there a suit filed in 1944 which may have led to the Boswell Amendment?
- L: What actually happened was that we were very closely associated with the gentleman who now sits on the Supreme Court as Associate Justice, the Honorable Thurgood Marshall, who was at that time special counsel of the NAACP. It was through the guidance we had from Mr. Marshall that we were able to put these cases together with regard to the denial of the right to vote in the Democratic primary in Alabama. Back in that day, less than thirty years ago, for one to win in the primary was tantamount to election, because the Republican Party had no particular strength in the South; it was just a party of patronage. And there were only a few whites who had any membership in the Republican Party. And those who had it, there may have been a few that were dedicated, but most of them who were in it, were in it just for what they could get out of it when the elections would come around—in the form of patronage. We found in many instances that the Republicans were worse; they were diehards on the race question, and of course, it was just a matter of choosing between the lesser of two evils, where the Democrats were worse than the Republicans or vice versa with regard to race. Now, the NAACP sent *Life* photographers in here for the primary of that year, which I am quite certain was held in May. These photographers conferred with us on the eve of the primary, on the day before, and we agreed that we would be at certain wards at certain hours in the afternoon.
- M: Now, were you registered at that time? Had you been allowed to register to vote in the general election?
- L: We were registered; but getting registered at that time, Dr. McLaurin, when you retrospect about the sort of, I would say, the difficult conditions—the Board of

Registrars had unlimited power, and they would compel you to recite or read from certain sections of the Constitution of the United States, and to interpret those sections of the Constitution. And no doubt, the people who were questioning you didn't know as much about the Constitution—or, knew no more than most of the people who were being registered. But they had the power to deny you the right of registration. And in addition to that, there was a retroactive feature about your poll tax payment. If you waited until you were 40, as an example, or 50 to get registered to vote, you had to pay retroactive poll tax back to your 21st birthday—although between 21 and 48 or 21 and 50 years of age, you made no attempt to vote. All of this was a remaining part of the so-called “Black Codes” that had been adopted by most of the Southern states after Reconstruction for the purpose of almost re-enslaving Blacks. Blacks responded quite well, despite the low economy of Black people. You had large numbers of Blacks who were willing to pay that poll tax for the purpose of voting. They cherished the privilege of voting. And it is amazing to contrast, I would say the apathy you find about voting today, especially among Blacks, as it related to those people back there 25, 30 years ago when they had difficult times getting registered to vote. Yes, we were qualified voters, but the Democratic primary was off limits to Black people; they could not vote in the Democratic primary because that was the controlling political party in the state of Alabama, and in all of the Southern states. And getting nominated in the Democratic primary—let me use the vernacular of the streets again—you had it made. The November election was just a formality.

M: Now, what happened after you were denied the right to vote in the May primary?

L: There were 12 of us, I think, who had been selected to go our office, the NAACP office, which was then located in what was Dr. Thompson's building at 8 North Warren Street. Dr. Gaines Thompson's father was there at that time, and our office was located in that building. And we worked all evening on those affidavits, preparing them and then getting them notarized, and sent them in to Thurgood Marshall, for Mr. Marshall to immediately submit them to the Attorney General of the United States—who at that time was the Hon. Francis Biddle. And that was done. When those affidavits were filed with Mr. Biddle, Mr. Biddle assured the NAACP and us that there would be criminal proceedings instituted against Mr. Gessner McCorvey of Mobile, who was then Chairman of the State Democratic Executive Committee—and the entire committee. Mr. McCorvey was regarded as a “Dixiecrat,” as they called them: one who apparently had very strong prejudice against Blacks, or he had at least expressed himself in his actions as having very strong prejudice against Blacks. It happened that in the interim between [19]44 and [19]46, Mr. Roosevelt died as President of the United States, and Mr. Truman

came in as President. And with Mr. Truman, a new Attorney General of the United States came in, the Hon. Tom Clark. Mr. Clark being a Texan, a Southerner himself, took this particular case under consideration, and gave the Democratic Party of Alabama a chance to correct the injustice itself. And we understand the Democratic Party was told that some action would have to be taken quite promptly. So on January 12th, 1946, Mr. Gessner McCorvey had the Democratic State Executive Committee to meet in Montgomery and declare that all racial barriers against Blacks would be dropped by the Democratic Party of Alabama.

M: Do you recall if you voted in the elections of the fall of 1946, or in the primary elections of 1946 in the spring. That would've been congressional elections at least. [19]46 was not a presidential year, but I don't recall if you had a senatorial candidate running, or gubernatorial candidate running; I can check this. But do you recall if you voted in [19]46, or if you attempted to vote in [19]46 and were denied the right to vote?

L: Subsequent to the dropping of the bars against Black voting in January of 1946, we voted in the Democratic primaries. But what happened is that a new method of denying Blacks the vote was schemed; and this is when the Boswell Amendment appeared upon the scene, about 1947 or 1948. And of course, that was also a method that was also used to keep Blacks from voting.

M: Mr. LeFlore, I'd like to ask you now if you feel the return of veterans in 1945, [19]46, and [19]47 had anything whatsoever to do with the somewhat more militant stance on the part of the NAACP on things like education, voter registration, and so forth? Do you believe there was any desire on the part of returning Blacks who had served their country in the Second World War to see such programs, and did you feel any need to implement such programs because of the expressed goals that we were fighting for in the Second World War?

L: Dr. McLaurin, we felt that Black men who had gone out to fight, bleed, and die for their country were entitled to a better deal than this country had prepared for them on their return. As an example right here in Mobile, when the men came back from World War II, they were restricted in training opportunities to a cooking and baking school. And all of the Black veterans who wished to take any kind of a course at all had to take cooking and baking. And it's—

M: Was this in the public school system, sort of an adult education program?

L: No, this was a separate school that was set up for that particular purpose. It was condoned by the federal authorities. This school was located at Davis Avenue and Cuba Streets.

M: And this was run as a federal project rather than a local project?

L: It was run as a local project, but primarily funded by federal monies. I don't know as to whether we could say it was run as a federal project or not, because it was set up as some of the veteran schools are set up around here now. For instance, we know of some business schools that accept veterans, but at this time, at that particular time, this was exclusively for veterans. So, let's say it was set up as a federal project for Black veterans. On the other hand, white veterans who returned home had training for numerous skills available to them that would fit them into the nation's scheme of industry or business. We certainly fought against the sort of thing that Black veterans had to suffer. Another very unsatisfactory factor was that the Mobile County Civil Service examinations were not opened to Black people. There were three veterans who had just come back from the war whose cases we were able to offer. All three of these men are pretty widely known in the city of Mobile. We were attempting to get the civil service barriers broken down in Mobile County, and we offered Prichard Councilman John Langham—Prichard councilman and NAACP president—and the gentleman who's the Mobile Housing Board and who's a vice principal of the public schools, John Gray, and a Mr. Murphy. I've forgotten Mr. Murphy's full name, but they were the three that we offered as plaintiffs in a suit that we filed in an effort to open up civil service examinations to Black people.

M: Do you recall the year in which that suit was filed, Mr. LeFlore?

L: I think the suit was filed Dr. McLaurin, in about 1949 I think it was—[19]48 or [19]49. And the Federal District Court here threw it out on what we thought was a most questionable technicality.

M: Would you recall the name of the case?

L: I don't recall how it was styled. I don't know whether it was styled in Langham's name, or Gray's name, or Murphy's name, vs. the Mobile County Personnel Board.

M: Okay, well thank you very much, Mr. LeFlore, for participating in this interview. [Break in recording] One other thing, Mr. LeFlore: the suit that was filed against the Boswell Amendment. Could you comment on how that suit came to be introduced

by the veterans' group—it was filed by a veterans' group, and not the NAACP, but I understand the NAACP had contemplated filing such a suit, and I believe you have the names of one of the individuals who filed that suit in 19—it would've been 1948, I think.

L: There were five plaintiffs in this particular action that was filed through the Voters and Veterans League of Mobile County that was headed by Mr. J.J. Thomas. One of the plaintiffs that we know who is still living, and I suspect there may be two or three others, is Mrs. Ethel King Carter. Mrs. Carter is still living. We just talked with her today about the Boswell Amendment action of which she was a part. The Boswell Amendment of course, after we were able to get the bars removed which denied Blacks the right to participate in the Alabama Democratic Primary, the white supremacist political element in the state—which was the ruling element—schemed the Boswell Amendment. And the Boswell Amendment was a very iniquitous effort to deprive Blacks of voting with very rigid educational requirements, and with the results being left to the discretion of the Board of Registrars. The decision against the Boswell Amendment—the Boswell Amendment was declared unconstitutional, I believe, in 1948 by the federal district court here, with Judge McDuffy presiding. And immediately thereafter, Blacks began to go down in large numbers—2[00] and 300 at the time—to try to register to vote. The Board of Registrars adopted a quarter system for Blacks, and would accept—a man by the name of Milton Snell was the chairman of the Board, and he would accept only 14 Blacks a day, and leave hundreds standing in line. Some of the ladies became hysterical and cried because of the rather ruthless system this man employed to keep Blacks from getting registered to vote.

M: Now, this was after the Boswell Amendment had been declared unconstitutional?

L: Yes, this was another of the very determined processes being used to keep Black people from becoming qualified voters. We had to go to the Department of Justice against this man, and the Department of Justice wasn't as effective as it should've been, unless the FBI did not give a true picture of what was existing in Alabama at that time. But we did get some relief through the Department of Justice.

M: Okay. Again, thank you very much, Mr. LeFlore. And this ends the taping of October 9, 1972.

[End of recording]

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