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JLFC 002 John L. LeFlore and Wiley Bolden
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Interviewed by Melton McLaurin on August 7, 1970
55 minute audio recording • 12 page transcript

Abstract: In this recording, John L. LeFlore and Wiley Bolden are interviewed by Melton McLaurin to discuss the Civil Rights Movement and the history of Mobile, Alabama. The interview begins with a focus on NAACP voting rights efforts in Mobile in 1944, and the fight against the Boswell Amendment. They also offer comparisons and contrasts in terms of voter registration for Black Alabamians in the 1940s, under the Folsom administration, versus the 1950s and 1960s. Mr. LeFlore also discusses the role of Joseph Langan, who served both as a state senator and as a longtime mayor of Mobile, in shaping the landscape for Black voting rights in Mobile. He also discusses the impact that the closing of Brookley Field had on Mobile and especially the Black community, and some of the dispossessing impacts of urban renewal and the construction of highway I-10.

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 002 John L. LeFlore and Wiley Bolden
Interviewed August 7, 1970

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

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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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Interviewee: John L. LeFlore and Wiley Bolden
Interviewer: Melton McLaurin
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M: —South Alabama, with John L. LeFlore of the Non-Partisan Voters League, and Mr. Wiley Bolden, B-O-L-D-E-N, who was an organizer with Mr. LeFlore of the first chapter of the NAACP here in Mobile. We're going to be asking Mr. LeFlore today about the efforts of the Negro citizens of Mobile in 1944 to vote in the Democratic primary, and in 1946 of Negro veterans in Mobile to register to vote.

L: We observe before us here an affidavit that was taken on the 9th day of May, 1944, subsequent to the attempt of Blacks to vote in the Democratic white primary in Mobile on May 2nd, 1944. This development had a very potent effect on the opening of the Democratic primary to Blacks, because, as a result of the denial of the right to vote on May 2nd, 1944, about a dozen complaints were filed by us with the Department of Justice through then-NAACP chief counsel Thurgood Marshall. Of course, Mr. Marshall is at this time an associate justice of the United States Supreme Court. Mr. Marshall filed the complaints with then-Attorney General Biddle. And Mr. Biddle had planned bringing criminal proceedings against the Democratic Executive Committee of the state of Alabama, in view of the fact that in 1941, in a case known as *Smith v. Allwright* or the "Texas White Primary Case," that the so-called "Democratic white primary" was declared illegal. However, the people who represented the political power structure in Alabama were adamant in their determination to prevent Blacks from voting in the Democratic primaries. Of course, it's rather ironical that at that same time, Black boys were fighting, bleeding, and dying on faraway battle fields for our professed system of democracy. This was, of course, during World War II. Mr. Biddle had made plans to—as we said a moment ago—bring criminal proceedings against the chairman of the Democratic Executive Committee of the state of Alabama, who was at that time Mr. Gessner T. McCorvey, a very prominent attorney of Mobile, and against the entire committee. It happened that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt died in office, and Mr. Truman succeeded in the presidency. Mr. Truman chose as the *new* attorney general, Mr. Tom Clark Sr. Mr. Clark later became a justice of the United States Supreme Court. Mr. Clark decided to adopt a new strategy with regard to the refusal to let Negroes vote—Negroes or Blacks—vote in the May 2nd, 1944 primary; he gave the state Democratic Executive Committee the privilege of removing the racial barriers or suffering the consequence of criminal proceedings. So, on January the 12th, 1946, Mr. Gessner McCorvey held a special meeting of the Alabama State Democratic Executive Committee in Montgomery, and removed the racial restrictions which had denied Blacks the right to vote in the Democratic primary. This was a significant change in the attitude of the Democratic Party in Alabama, but this attitude was forced under the threat of federal

prosecution. The people of Alabama—the power structure of Alabama—devised a new scheme after they had to open the white primary to Blacks, through the Boswell Amendment. Now, I'm assuming that we shall talk about that later, in this particular episode of the history narration of what happened in Mobile.

M: Mr. LeFlore, as I recall from some research in the period, both the *New York Times* and the local papers here in the state reported that while Black voters in Mobile County were turned away when they made the effort to vote in the Democratic primary on May the 2nd, 1944, that Black voters—at least those few who were registered—in Birmingham and Jefferson County *did* vote as usual. All the newspaper comments include the words "as usual." *Was* this customary? Was there a wide difference in practices here in Mobile and Birmingham? How extensive was the incidence of Negro voting in Birmingham, and why do you think there was a difference between the situation in Birmingham and that here in Mobile?

L: You know, that is rather significant, that in Jefferson County, a limited number of Blacks did vote. You had only a small number of Negro or Black voters in Jefferson County, and perhaps you had only a small number in Mobile County at that time. We don't recall the exact figure, but it was no more than several thousand. The situation in Jefferson County differed from that in Mobile County, was that the Jefferson County Democratic Executive Committee did not necessarily follow the mandate of the Alabama State Democratic Executive Committee in denying Blacks the right to vote. But in Mobile County, it appeared that the people here were determined to follow the will of the State Democratic Executive Committee to the letter. That happened in Mobile and a number of other counties, as well. But it appeared that the Black voters in Jefferson County represented the favored few throughout the state.

B: I'm Wiley L. Bolden. At the time mentioned by Mr. LeFlore, May 1944, it must be remembered that the Democratic Party of Alabama had been operating under the caption that they were a white party, and that they were the white Democratic Party—a private party, so that the action of the committee was in keeping with what they had held for years.

L: Something else that is rather important with regard to the 1944 effort to prevent Blacks from voting in Mobile County, is the fact that *Life Magazine* had sent a team of photographers in here to make pictures at the scene of the various wards when Blacks were denied the right to vote. And these pictures gave added impetus to the effort to break down the discriminatory practice of not letting Blacks vote,

because *Life Magazine* was distributed to men in the armed forces throughout the world, in the European theatre of war as well as the theatre of war in the Pacific. We believe that it may have been an important factor in having the Department of Justice to take such prompt steps to challenge this sort of situation, which proscribed the rights of Black Americans to participate in a primary for the election of the officials who would control the destiny of all the people. And as we related previously, Mr. Biddle, who was then attorney general, agreed to criminal prosecution. Mr. Roosevelt died in office, and Mr. Truman succeeded Mr. Roosevelt. And the new attorney general, the Hon. Tom Clark, as we mentioned previously, agreed—well, he threw out a compromise, he threw out the olive branch. And in throwing out the olive branch, he offered the Democratic Party of Alabama either one of two propositions: that they'd have to permit Blacks to vote in the Democratic primary, or they'd have to be prosecuted. As we said, the Hon. Gessner McCorvey of Mobile was the chairman of the State Democratic Executive Committee, and it was called into a special meeting in Montgomery, Alabama for January 12th, 1946. And at that time, the Democratic Party of Alabama removed the racial restrictions which had kept Black citizens from Alabama—Black taxpayers and Black American citizens—from participating in the election of officials who would govern their and other peoples' destiny in our state.

M: Mr. LeFlore mentioned the Boswell Amendment that was enacted once the white primary was outlawed, to restrict Black voting. I'd like to ask you, Mr. LeFlore, about the campaign to pass the Boswell Amendment. The whites were split with some of the leading politicians—Folsom, Hill, Sparkman, Attorney General Carmichael and others opposing it, and people like Frank Dixon, Gessner McCorvey, and Horace Wilkinson favoring it. I'd like to ask you about that campaign, what part you may have played in it, or what contacts you had with the white politicians who were opposing its enactment; and then also to ask you about the efforts of your organization, as well as others, to have the Boswell Amendment declared unconstitutional by the courts.

L: This fight for the rights of Black people during this particular period was no less significant than the struggle of Black people throughout our entire history in America for a place in the sun—for our *rightful* place in the sun. After the Democratic State Executive Committee was, if we may say, literally forced to permit Blacks to vote in the Democratic primaries of Alabama—as a result of, as we mentioned before, a Department of Justice determination that Blacks *would* vote—the political hierarchy in Alabama devised a new scheme, which was offered by a member of the Alabama Legislature whose first name I do not recall at the moment, but his surname was Boswell. And this iniquitous scheme, of course,

would again emasculate the rights of Blacks to vote. Because of its passage in the state legislature and its having been offered to the people in a referendum, to make it a bona fide constitutional amendment, there was a very definite cleavage in the thinking of the political power structure in Alabama. Men like Senator Hill, Senator Sparkman, the then-Attorney General Carmichael, and others, opposed the Boswell Amendment. Men like Governor Frank Dixon, and Mr. McCorvey, and that philosophy of thinking which they represented, offered nightmarish pictures to the white people of Alabama that if Blacks were permitted to vote, that it could lead, could give access to the bad chambers and things and all—any other kind of nonsense that it was felt would make an impact on the minds of white people in this referendum. Now, we would like to say this in passing: when the matter is before the state legislature, a man who is generally regarded as having a very fair spirit toward Blacks, a Mobilian, the Hon. Joseph N. Langan, was state senator. And Mr. Langan, along with two or three other senators, attempted to filibuster the Boswell Amendment to death in the waning hours of a particular session of the state legislature. Those who wanted the Boswell Amendment passed represented the leaders in the senate, and the senate was held in session all night, I think for two or three nights. You had around the clock sessions, until Mr. Langan and the two or three senators who stood with him were finally worn out from fatigue, and they had to give up the fight. It was a very, very interesting—it was a, we would say, highly dignified effort that was carried on by Mr. Langan and two or three other senators, for human dignity. But their efforts failed, as we mentioned, because they could not hold out against time. Now, the Boswell proposal was offered to the voters of Alabama, and the crowd that painted the ugly pictures about what would happen if Blacks were given the right to vote, won out. In the referendum—and of course, it became known then as the Boswell Amendment—efforts were then devised to attack it. And we were assigned the responsibility, those of us in the NAACP here, of drawing up the plans that would lead to an attack on the Boswell Amendment. We had scheduled the legal proceedings to start within 30 days. It so happened that one of our board members, a Mr. J. J. Thomas, who headed the Voters and Veterans League, had other thoughts about initiating the challenge against the Boswell Amendment, and he filed a suit against the Boswell Amendment within the 30-day period that we had decided that we would institute our court action. And it is to the credit of the Voters and Veterans League that the Boswell Amendment was declared unconstitutional. Now, as we said before, Mr. Thomas, who was a member of our executive committee, sat in our meeting and got the plans, and he knew what date we were supposed to file this action. And so, he just beat us to it, if I might use the vernacular of the streets. But we weren't so concerned as to who did it; the matter was that we felt that the Boswell Amendment should be erased from the statute books, and should be erased as a

part of the Alabama Constitution. It was through this man and his organization that the Boswell Amendment was declared unconstitutional; before then, Federal District Judge McDuffy, John J. McDuffy, who had been a former congressman. After the Boswell Amendment was declared unconstitutional, the forces of racial proscription in Mobile County and a number of other counties, devised *another* scheme. This time, Blacks—after the amendment was declared unconstitutional, Blacks appeared before the Board of Registrars by the hundreds to get registered to vote. During one particular session of voter registration, we were able to get 1,125 Negro or Black people registered, despite the slowdown tactics adopted by the Board of Registrars in Mobile County. We had to file complaints with the Department of Justice on several occasions, because the Board elected to use a select policy: that is, whites and Blacks standing in line to get registered to vote. The chairman, a man by the name of Milton Snell, had a quota system for Blacks. At no time, until we filed a complaint, did he take any more than 15 Blacks a day. We filed complaints to him; on the days we filed complaints, we were able to get as many as 20 Blacks out of several hundred registered. We recall one lady became hysterical: she was a school teacher, Mrs. Estella Hicks. She stood in line all day, and at the end of the day she was turned away when the Board of Registrars could've easily registered her. Mrs. Hicks became hysterical, and she broke down and wept. There were other people who were as equally frustrated. Mr. Snell pursued this policy to the point that we had to file an additional complaint with the Department of Justice. My being a postal employee at the time, Mr. Snell filed a complaint with the Civil Service Commission against me, charging me with political activity. The Commission made an investigation, and one year later not only exonerated me for my participation in getting people registered to vote, but commended me for what was thought—what it regarded—as proper action upon the part of a citizen to make his community a better place in which to live, by getting others registered to vote. We were never completely successful in getting the number of people registered to vote who appeared before the Board of Registrars. Only when there was a change and Jim Folsom became governor, and the Board of Registrars was changed—as we mentioned—and one young fellow by the name of Gunny Gonzales became a member of the board as an appointee of Governor Folsom. I think his real initials are E. J., but he is known as "Gunny" Gonzales to those of us who may colloquially say that that was a nickname for Mr. Gonzales. Mr. Gonzales did not follow the usual line that Mr. Snell had adopted, and as a consequence of this, we were then able to get a larger number of Blacks registered to vote, because Mr. Gonzales saw to it that they *did* vote. Incidentally, Mr. Gonzales was on the board before the Boswell Amendment was ruled on, and he gave valuable testimony that was helpful to the plaintiffs in getting a ruling that outlawed the Boswell Amendment. He remained on the board after the Boswell

Amendment was declared unconstitutional, and he did lend, we would say, important service toward seeing that Blacks registered in much larger numbers than had previously been permitted under Mr. Snell.

M: Mr. LeFlore and Mr. Bolden, I wanted to ask you one thing about the motivation of men like Joe Langan and Jim Folsom. There were few Black voters in Alabama in this period, and no white politician could be charged with simply wanting to receive the votes of Blacks because they were not all that crucial. What is it, in your opinion, that led men like Langan and Folsom, and others—Gonzales as well—to take the actions that they did?

L: It is my candid belief that Governor Folsom, Mr. Langan, and here in Mobile, Mr. Gonzales, were motivated because of their belief and respect for human dignity. They had little or nothing to gain insofar as political prestige may be involved, because it was an unpopular crusade that they were carrying on for justice for Black people. But throughout history, we have found men—and we have found Southerners—who have been true to the principle that God intended: that all men should have equal opportunities to take their rightful place in the sun. I think that the same is true of Jim Folsom today, although he's in the evening of his life, and perhaps he will not appear on the political scene again. But those of us who knew Mr. Folsom 20 years ago have a lot of respect for him, and we pay tribute to the fight that he made maybe a score of years ago or less than that, for justice and the right of Black people to participate in the ordinary affairs of government. The same is true of Joe Langan. If I may say this in passing, that because of the stand Mr. Langan took against the Boswell Amendment, because he took a similar stand for equal salaries for Black teachers in Mobile County, he was defeated for re-election to the Alabama State Senate. Joe Langan proposed the first equal salaries principle for Black teachers in Mobile County. As a consequence of his action, and his threat not to vote for another penny's tax for the public schools of Mobile County until they equalized salaries, led to a very substantial increase in the salaries of Black school teachers in this particular county. But as we said a moment ago, it also led to the defeat of Joe Langan at when he ran for re-election. He was defeated by Mr. Tom Johnston.

B: I also think that the attitude, the position taken by Mssrs. Folsom, Langan and Gonzales—men of that caliber and type—was not only because of their humanitarian attitude, but because they loved their fellow Alabamian citizens to become rationalized in the matter of race. The Negro had been neglected because of his color, and because they did not want him to participate in the political arena of affairs. So, Mr. Langan, and Mr. Folsom, and others of that caliber felt, I believe,

that they were doing their race—they were doing the white race, pardon me—a very good service to try to bring them to the point that they would be representative citizens of Alabama, that the state would be seen in a different light. These are my views gentlemen; and I believe verily that was one of the things that motivated them to these things. Plus, that they were humanitarians, and I agree wholeheartedly with what Mr. LeFlore said, and also—.

M: Mr. LeFlore, in 1948, there was a great contest within the Democratic Party in Alabama between the states' righters, led by Gessner McCorvey and Frank Dixon, Horace Wilkinson, and the loyalists, led by Senators Sparkman and Hill, Governor Folsom, and Joe Langan and others, for control of the delegation to the Democratic Convention in Philadelphia, and for control of the state's electoral vote. As I recall from our research, I believe there was a delegation of Negro leaders from Alabama who attended the convention in Philadelphia. What I would like to know is: one, what role you or other Negro leaders throughout the state played in that primary contest; what role you or other may have played, including Senator Langan, in the efforts after the states' righters won within the state to force their electors to vote for the national ticket; and two, what your attitude was in November of 1948 in that presidential election between Harry Truman, Dewey for the Republicans, and Henry Wallace for the Progressive Party—and Strom Thurman for the states' righters.

L: We recall quite vividly, the situation, the fight, that developed between the states' righters and the loyalists. Blacks of course, gave their support to the loyalists. The ensuing fight that erupted at the Democratic Convention of course developed, we would say, a showdown battle which led to a number of the states' righters walking out of the Democratic Convention. When the November the 2nd election came, we—as I would say, we attempted to give—we *did* give support—to the loyalist cause. And in the political race, in the election, and the presidential race, while we looked upon—we had a certain amount of sympathetic loyalty to the Progressive Party, we in the main supported the Democratic Party and the presidential aspirations of President Harry Truman. Mr. Truman's fight—very, very few people expected for Mr. Truman to win. The polls predicted that Governor Thomas Dewey of New York would win. But surprisingly, because of his hellfire campaign, Mr. Truman came out on top. And while Mr. Thurman did win a number of electoral votes in the South, and Mr. Wallace didn't win any electoral votes—he had a fairly impressive popular vote, but no electoral votes. And of course, the country—when I say "the country," those of us who believed in the democratic ideals, white and Black alike—breathed a bit better after Mr. Truman snatched victory from defeat. It was quite a surprise to the American people.

M: Mr. LeFlore, I wonder if you might comment on the difficulties of registration throughout the [19]50s and [19]60s, whether or not that difficulty varied from one time or another.

L: Yes sir, it did. Voter registration under the first Folsom administration was not so difficult. There was a very simple form that had to be filled out under the provisions that were made for applicants who sought to register to vote. Then under Gordon Persons—we did support Mr. Persons in his election—there was no substantial retrogressive change, we'd say that—that Blacks who were able to fill out the form like other people, were able to get registered to vote. There was an educational requirement, and the people who met that requirement, along with being able to answer a few other questions, were permitted to vote. Now, we could not say that boards of registrars carried this policy out precisely in an equal manner for whites and Blacks. We do believe—we have quite a bit of suspicion—that boards, many times—especially in rural areas, as well as some of the urban areas—did not live up to the letter of the law, and that there were overtones that involved race in what some of the boards did. Now, in the second Folsom administration, the same sort of pattern more or less prevailed. Only at the time of the election of John Patterson did we note a substantial change retrogressively. This was accelerated during the Wallace administration. Mr. Wallace imposed requirements for registration. There were several sets of questionnaires that were available at a board of registrar's office, some of which contained questions that were more difficult to answer than others. And almost invariably, the questionnaires with the most difficult questions on them were presented to Negro applicants for registration. As a consequence thereof, Negro registration was cut down terribly during the Wallace admin—.

[Break in recording]

M: Could you share something about [inaudible 37:28]?

L: Mmhm. The situation remained the same under the Wallace administration until passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. And of course, by the time the act was implemented down in this area, it was almost—it was at the end of the Wallace administration. Of course, Mrs. Wallace succeeded her husband as governor, and the full effect of the 1965 Voting Rights Act—may we change that? A very definite effect resulted because of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that led to a larger registration for the part of Blacks. The irony of this situation is, that it appears that when it was more difficult for Blacks to register, they sought, they were more eager to register; they were more eager to become qualified voters. After the passage of

the 1965 Civil Rights Act, it appeared that intensified voter registration campaigns had to be carried on, and the results were not the same that had been previously experienced right after the outlawing of the Boswell Amendment.

M: Mr. LeFlore, Mobile's always prided itself on having a fairly progressive position on race, and having a fairly favorable climate in racial affairs. I wondered whether or not you agree that was true compared to other cities in the state and other places in the South, and if were true, or to what extent it was true, to what do you attribute it? What would you say caused that favorable climate of racial affairs, if you think that it prevailed?

L: There are still a lot of paradoxes about Mobile's race relations. We believe the matter of Mobile being unsurpassed, if we may class it as that, in good race relations is a myth. We cannot feel, when we look at the overall situation, that is true. We do believe that there's been substantial progress made in race relations here, especially in the past decade—or, we'll say in the past 15 years—because you had men in public office like Joe Langan. Before Joe Langan came on the scene, it was very difficult to make any progress at all toward achieving certain desirable goals. But as I sit here and realize that we were able to get our library system desegregated merely by filing a petition, pointing out at the same time we filed the petition we were ready to go to court. We were able to get our terminal facilities desegregated, because we filed petitions with the federal authorities. So in this instance, the city of Mobile had nothing to do with that. We were able to get our city buses desegregated by filing a suit. But before the federal district court ruled on that suit, in view of the fact that you had men in office like Joe Langan, the people were riding together without the necessity of the federal court order. But we wanted the federal court order for the purpose of implementing this right for Blacks not to be segregated on city buses. We were able to get the public parks and playgrounds desegregated by filing a petition during the administration of Mr. Langan, Mr. Trenier, and Mr. McNally. Of course when we filed that petition, Mr. Trenier got on the air against this individual; but I think the votes of the other two commissioners made it bona fide that Mobile parks and playgrounds would be desegregated. Because we had a Joe Langan in city hall, we were able to get Black policemen put on right after Mr. Langan was elected. Because there was a Joe Langan in city hall, we were able to get the racial restrictions against Blacks taking city and county civil service examinations removed. We had put the issue in court, had lost on a technicality; there was quite a bit of consternation. But when Joe Langan, Henry Luscher, and Charles Hackmeyer were elected to the city commission in the early [19]50s, Mr. Langan and Mr. Luscher went down before the personnel board and had all those restrictions removed. Many people no doubt

will be shocked to know that up until the early [19]50s, practically all the civil service examinations were reserved for white people. Blacks could not take them; their lot was to have the menial jobs. Many people don't know that at the turn of the century, we had two lynchings right out near Plateau, and that it was necessary to call out the National Guard on several occasions here in Mobile to protect Blacks who had been accused of rape from having been lynched. Then, in some other areas, we find that change has come only with great difficulty. However, what helped us to accelerate the pace of change here without going to court was the fact that you had movements going on in other places in Alabama, such as Birmingham and Montgomery, that we believe eased our situation here and caused us to get a favorable sort of climate that would not have otherwise existed. We don't believe that all of this was entirely voluntary, whatever has been achieved. And at the same time, we reiterate that it's a myth, in our opinion, that Mobile has been an unsurpassed community in the matter of good race relations.

M: Mr. LeFlore, you mentioned that Senator Langan was defeated for re-election to the state senate in the late [19]40s because of his stand on the Boswell Amendment and on equal pay for teachers. As I understand it, he was elected to the City Commission in the early [19]50s; how do you explain his election then, and how do you explain his long tenure in office? What combination did he put together to stay in office in light of the unpopularity of his views, in some quarters at least, on the racial question?

L: In the interim between the time of his defeat for re-election in the state senate, and the time that he was elected city commissioner, we had the Korean Conflict. And Joe Langan had a high rank in the Alabama National Guard at that time, and he went to Korea. I shall never forget that on his return to Mobile, city buses were enjoying a flourishing business, and in many instances—this may seem almost incredulous—the buses were passing up Blacks on one corner and picking up whites on another corner. And it was this same Joe Langan, with the indomitable will that he has for—in my judgment—for justice and fair play, who wrote a public letter which was published in the newspaper to the effect that he had seen white boys and Black boys fight, bleed, and die together on foreign battlefields, and regarding as reprehensible the fact that buses were passing up Black people on one corner to pick up whites on another. We would say that Joe Langan, by many critics who are regarded as being impartial in their perspective, is felt as being an outstanding public leader. And we believe that it is because of that fact that Joe Langan was kept in public office for a long period of time. And perhaps—I think he would've remained in public office if it had not been for a certain segment of Blacks who are alleged to have frightened other Blacks away from the polls during the city

election of 1969, by telling them not to vote. It is regarded that those people, along with a so-called "extremist" element of whites, were responsible for the defeat of Joe Langan in the last city election. So, his continuity in office, in our judgement, is due to the fact that he has been an outstanding public servant. It is our observation that Mr. Langan was able to put a model group of citizens—or a variated group, whichever you'd like to call them—together to mold out his political team. Labor was usually on his side; many of the people from the silk stocking area; Blacks, of course, were also on his side; and there were other elements in the community—and the Catholic people were generally his supporters. Not entirely, not *all* of the Catholic people, but a vast majority of the Catholic people supported Joe Langan, just as did a vast majority of Blacks, and we would say, most of labor. Only that element of labor which probably was strongly prejudiced on the race question opposed Joe Langan's elections.

M: Mr. LeFlore, I'd like to ask you a question if I may. I'd like you to comment generally on the economic condition of Blacks in Mobile in the past, oh, 30 years during your period as civil rights leader. And specifically comment on the influence that Brookley Field had from its inception until its phase-out on the economic life of Blacks in Mobile, and also other major economic institutions that perhaps affected the life of Blacks in the economic field; perhaps the state docks or any others you might like to comment on.

L: We would feel that—may we say this: the phasing out of Brookley Air Force Base was tragic for Mobile. It was especially so for the Black segment of the population. Many of the Blacks that we know who have gone elsewhere, were substantial citizens, citizens who had a very deep interest in their community, and who had pride in the fact that they were Mobilians. These people, many had attempted to buy homes or *were* buying homes. We think of some that we know who lived out at Hillsdale Heights, and lived in other sections of the community, who had to give up their homes because there was no employment—because they had to move elsewhere. Up until about 20 years ago, the post office, and the shipyard, and the railroad shops furnished the basic employment for Blacks. After the coming of Brookley Field—it's been a little more than 20 years ago, about 30 years ago, about three decades ago—the post office, the railroad shops, and the shipbuilding industry, furnished the basic employment here. Then we had the paper mills to come in, we had Brookley Air Force Base, Aluminum Ore, and several other smaller industries that helped to bolster the economy of the community; and of course, since we are a part of the community despite the fact that usually we had the most menial jobs, we were helped as well. Most of these people became solid citizens, many of whom came from rural areas, and it meant better opportunities

for their families and better education for their children. The phasing out of Brookley Air Force Base has left a vacuum here that is, in our judgement, not going to be easily overcome. We were at the Brookley Air Force facility the other day, and it's merely a ghost town now. The question of getting additional industry in here is one that perplexes us, because Mobile is Alabama's only seaport. And Alabama is rich in certain natural resources such as timber, iron, and coal; and it is perplexing, it is puzzling as to why the city of Mobile doesn't grow with the same rate that we would find other cities under like circumstances making progress. It is appalling to us, and we wonder what could be some of the underlying causes. We have had extensive urban renewal projects here. We realize, as an example, the downtown area of Mobile is certainly drying up, and it's a challenge to all of us who're interested in our community to do something about that situation; but we're wondering just what *should* be done. Urban renewal has no doubt hurt to a certain extent. People have been dispossessed of their homes, and they've moved out to the suburban areas, or wherever they could find homes. With the kind of residential restrictions that Blacks suffer here, Blacks have to take homes wherever they can get them. The same is true about highway I-10 which, we understand, moved out about 13 families Down the Bay. All of these have been factors by moving Blacks away from their jobs—and the fact that we have a low economy, and up through the 1960s, the educational median for Blacks in the Mobile area was about 7 years as compared to 12.1 years for the average white person. So as a consequence, in addition to the element of prejudice that would develop, or discrimination because of race, Blacks were further restricted by the fact that they did not have adequate education to move into certain jobs. And all in all, the phasing out of Brookley Air Force Base and these other changes in the wrong direction have had a great impact on the economy of Black people in the city and county of Mobile.

M: End of this session.

[End of recording]

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