

Irvin M. Williams Oral History Interview –JFK #1, 3/19/1965
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Biographical Note

Williams, Irvin M.; Gardener (1949-1962), Chief Gardener (1962-2008). Williams discusses his job as the Chief White House Gardener, touching upon the flood of flowers that arrived after John F. Kennedy's [JFK] assassination and his task in arranging them. He also discusses the Rose Garden and the Kennedys' love for it, among other issues.

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Irvin M. Williams
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1, 5, 12, 16, 19	Williams' work at the White House
2, 8	The Rose Garden
3, 8, 10, 17	The Kennedys and their garden
6, 17, 22	Williams' interactions with John F. Kennedy [JFK] and his family
13	The East Garden
18	JFK's assassination

Oral History Interview

with

IRVIN M. WILLIAMS

March 19, 1965
Washington, D.C.

By Pamela Turnure

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TURNURE: This is an interview with Irvin Williams, the Chief White House Gardener. Is that your correct title?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

TURNURE: How long have you been at the White House?

WILLIAMS: I have worked on special assignments at the White House since 1950. I accepted a permanent assignment in June of 1962.

[-1-]

TURNURE: I see. So you were only there with President Kennedy. You weren't there with the Eisenhowers?

WILLIAMS: Only on special assignments.

TURNURE: I see. Can you tell me a little about the Rose Garden? I'm not too sure, myself because I didn't come to the White House until '63. Was there

always a garden there called the Rose Garden?

WILLIAMS: There has always been a garden there. I think that the first garden was planned back around 1800. The first roses, I understand, went into the West Garden in 1913. I believe that was under President Wilson.

TURNURE: Was it, then, just mainly roses in the garden?

WILLIAMS: Roses, bulbs, and other flowers.

[-2-]

It has changed somewhat over the years.

TURNURE: Then I gather that Mrs. Kennedy was the one who became really very interested in the garden.

WILLIAMS: I believe that it was Mrs. Kennedy and the President.

TURNURE: And the President. He was interested, too?

WILLIAMS: Very much. He loved the garden. He stated, he needed a larger area in which to greet groups. There were many, many, many groups.

TURNURE: I do remember what pride he took in it. You'd have those barriers up, and you weren't allowed to walk through the garden because he wanted the grass to be just perfect.

WILLIAMS: Exactly. He loved the lawn especially when it was plush green.

TURNURE: Yes. Tell me, did he know many of the

[-3-]

names of the flowers?

WILLIAMS: Yes, he'd remark on a number of occasions when he was coming through the garden, as to how pretty it was; and he'd mention the tulips as well as the crab apples. So he did know some of the plant material.

TURNURE: Would he ask questions as he went by?

WILLIAMS: Yes, he would ask questions.

TURNURE: To try to find out more about it.

WILLIAMS: Exactly. Certain flowers would catch his eye, and he would ask the variety name.

TURNURE: How did Mrs. Paul Mellon enter into it? She was a friend of the Kennedys, I know, but...

WILLIAMS: Actually, I think that she was asked by the President to design him a garden there, which would be the type of

[-4-]

garden that all could enjoy and yet would have space enough for him to greet these groups of which he met so many.

TURNURE: Were the flowers changed?

WILLIAMS: Yes. We put bulbs in in the late autumn, which will be our spring show. When the bulbs are finished, we go into an annual perennial, which is the summer show. We end up in the early fall with chrysanthemums and roses, which would be our autumn show.

TURNURE: I know that Mrs. Kennedy liked simple flowers.

WILLIAMS: That's right, she did. One of her favorites was the dianthus, called bravo, a little, eye-catching, red flower.

TURNURE: And I remember that she disliked

[-5-]

chrysanthemums, wasn't it? There were certain flowers which she said she never wanted to have in the White House. I thought it was chrysanthemums.

WILLIAMS: I don't believe that she cared for glads and snaps, and some of the more commonly used flowers, but she did like chrysanthemums.

TURNURE: One question that we like to ask people is if you can remember when you first met the President. Do you happen to remember? Was it when he was going to his office?

WILLIAMS: I first met him in the late fall of '61 when we were first planning the

renovation of the garden, which was to take place in the spring of '62. I met him along with Mrs. Mellon.

TURNURE: I see. Was he friendly always?

[-6-]

WILLIAMS: Very friendly.

TURNURE: You probably saw more of him than a lot of other people would working in the White House because you were right on his route whenever he had to go back and forth from his office to the house or to the swimming pool.

WILLIAMS: Just about every day.

TURNURE: Did you ever see much of the children?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I saw the children every day, too. I had the pleasure of lifting little John on and off the pony occasionally and answering questions for Caroline -- why we were doing this, what the purpose was.

TURNURE: They were very inquisitive children, don't you think?

WILLIAMS: They were, yes.

TURNURE: They liked to know just what was happening.

[-7-]

WILLIAMS: They sure did.

TURNURE: You probably saw the children in the school, too, because they must have gone to the President's office fairly frequently for candy, didn't they?

WILLIAMS: Yes, ma'am. This was almost every day.

TURNURE: Someone said that he'd go out on the porch and clap his hands, and then they'd all come running?

WILLIAMS: He would do this. Then the dogs would come running and the children come and all gather around him. He'd also go out and lie down in the grass on warm days and play with the children. They'd all be all over him.

TURNURE: Then the Rose Garden was also used for him to address various groups

[-8-]

that came to the White House, if they were small enough, right? People would gather in the Rose Garden.

WILLIAMS: Yes. He had groups there that filled the entire garden.

TURNURE: Had that been done before with other Presidents, do you know?

WILLIAMS: It was President Eisenhower who had several beds of roses removed in order to make a larger area to greet people. He, also, found it too small.

TURNURE: I remember that it was planned -- but it rained -- that they were to have a state dinner in the Rose Garden -- the one for Haile Selassie, I believe.

WILLIAMS: Yes, ma'am. We had such inclement weather that it was called off.

TURNURE: But, eventually, President Johnson, I believe, had a dinner there, which

[-9-]

was the first one in the Rose Garden.

WILLIAMS: Yes, ma'am, the first one.

TURNURE: Was the Rose Garden used for anything else? The family, for example, never sat out there.

WILLIAMS: Well, the President used the patio in the Rose Garden to confer, and I noticed Mrs. Kennedy to use it on occasion.

TURNURE: Did you?

WILLIAMS: Yes, ma'am.

TURNURE: Mr. Williams, could you tell me approximately how many different varieties of flowers there were in the Rose Garden?

WILLIAMS: I would say there are approximately 150 to 200 different varieties. This would include all three changes of the garden per season.

TURNURE: How big an area is it? That would be

[-10-]

of interest to know.

WILLIAMS: It's approximately 130 feet long and has a grass strip about 50 feet wide. The 2 beds are each 10 feet wide.

TURNURE: It's surrounded by a hedge?

WILLIAMS: It has an osmanthus hedge bordering both sides. Running parallel with the osmanthus hedge we have five Catherine crab apples on each side, white in flower, very dainty trees. We have four magnolias, one in each of the four corners of the garden, which are commemorative trees planted by President Kennedy. They are quite large. The patio is in the east end. The background for that is the magnolias planted by Andrew Johnson, which are very gorgeous. They give the garden and patio a perfect setting,

[-11-]

with the President's office on the west end as the balance for the garden.

TURNURE: Were there any other changes that the Kennedys made in the grounds of the White House, aside from the Rose Garden?

WILLIAMS: We added a number of trees and shrubs in the south grounds, in the peripheral area, for added beauty, to give the grounds a closeness. This, we thought, was very good. I understand the Olmstead brothers had proposed this in their report to the President back in 1935. We think that it's very fitting and very attractive on the inside as well as outside.

TURNURE: What about -- do you call it a pond -- on the south end?

WILLIAMS: The South Fountain.

TURNURE: The South Fountain. Do the flowers

[-12-]

change in that at all?

WILLIAMS: Yes. The South Fountain has bulbs planted around it in the fall; and when they're finished in the late spring, it's replanted with plants such as geraniums, alyssum, and dusty miller.

TURNURE: I see. On the north side, in the front of the White House, were there trees or shrubs added?

WILLIAMS: Yes, we added trees there on the North Lawn. These were replacements for trees that had been damaged from storms, blown over, or had died from various tree diseases.

TURNURE: I wanted to ask you about the new garden they were planning, which was supposed to be similar, in a sense, to the Rose Garden.

WILLIAMS: The East Garden.

[-13-]

TURNURE: The East Garden. When was that idea conceived?

WILLIAMS: That was, I believe, in the early part of 1963. Again, Mrs. Mellon was asked by the President and the First Lady to design a garden there.

TURNURE: There had been nothing in that before, as I remember.

WILLIAMS: Actually, not too much. It was mostly grass with osmanthus hedges.

TURNURE: That was never completed, although started, before the assassination. It was just beginning, as I remember.

WILLIAMS: That's right. We had worked and completed about half of what we have there today.

TURNURE: As far as you know, had they thought of any name for this garden? Were they planning to call it the East Garden?

WILLIAMS: Not to my knowledge.

TURNURE: You don't know. You mena, nothing was

[-14-]

really said.

WILLIAMS: Nothing was said.

TURNURE: It was Mrs. Johnson who decided to call it the Jacqueline Kennedy Garden?

WILLIAMS: This is what I understand.

TURNURE: Yes, that's what I understand, too. Do you have anything else that you'd like to say about flowers that you can think of, which I wouldn't be able to, that would be of interest?

WILLIAMS: The garden, I think, is unique in itself. It has topiary hollies, which are clipped hollies similar to the one in Williamsburg. It's bordered along the glass windows with European, small-leaf lindens.

TURNURE: This is the East Garden?

WILLIAMS: The East Garden. The garden has gravel walks leading along the building, itself,

[-15-]

has magnolias also, to correspond with the ones in back of the President's patio. These magnolias back the pergola, which is built in the garden. At the opposite end we have a small fountain there, which is very attractive, and well landscaped background for it.

TURNURE: Anything else that might be of interest about the White House lawns? How many people do you have working for you?

WILLIAMS: I have about five, total, working with us day by day.

TURNURE: Taking care of the grounds?

WILLIAMS: Taking care of the grounds. When we encounter major work, I can call the Park Service office and ask for one man or six or whatever it might take to do the job. This works out very well.

TURNURE: You were starting to tell me before

[-16-]

about an experience you had with the President, which I think would be interesting.

WILLIAMS: Yes. It was one warm day in June of '63, I believe. Mrs. Lincoln, the President's secretary, called and said, "The President wants you in his office at ten past twelve." I began to rack my brains as to what he would want me in his office for at ten past twelve. When I entered Mrs. Lincoln's office, the President greeted me and said that he was very much concerned with the brown patches in

the center of the lawn. I informed him that, due to the cancellation of the big choppers -- they were using the old type -- the H-34's that were exhausting down -- the burn was coming from the helicopters. Still, when we walked out, he wanted me to walk with

[-17-]

him. So we walked out into the lawn area, and he was very unhappy with what he had seen. There was such a conglomeration of grasses as well as weeds, and he wanted to know when we were going to do something about it.

TURNURE: So he took tremendous interest and pride, didn't he, in the White House?

WILLIAMS: He sure did.

TURNURE: Could you tell me where you were at the time of the President's assassination?

WILLIAMS: It was a sunny afternoon, and I had decided to go home early. I departed from the White House about 12:30 and did a couple of errands on the way. When I arrived home, my wife met me on the back steps, and she said, "Have you heard?" I said, "Have I heard what?" She said, "The President

[-18-]

and Governor Connally have been shot." I just couldn't believe what I heard. It was just about that time that Walter Cronkite announced again that they had been shot, but they did not know how serious the injury was.

TURNURE: Your wife, then, must have just heard it on the radio when you drove in.

WILLIAMS: Just a few minutes before, yes.

TURNURE: Then did you come back to the White House that day?

WILLIAMS: I called back in, but I actually didn't return until the next morning to see if there was anything that I could do to help.

TURNURE: Then you came Saturday morning?

WILLIAMS: On Saturday morning, yes.

TURNURE: What were your functions then? By then, I suppose, flowers were arriving from all over the world. They were

[-19-]

put in the Executive Office Building, weren't they?

WILLIAMS: I believe so, yes. Rusty Young was handling the receiving of the flowers.

TURNURE: Were you asked to do anything by Mrs. Kennedy?

WILLIAMS: Not right at that time. We attended the funeral services at the church, and then we were asked if we would go to the cemetery and help with the arrangements of the many, many floral displays.

TURNURE: But that must have been arranged before the funeral, wasn't it? It seems to me that I saw you there on Sunday or Monday morning early, at Arlington.

TURNURE: I remember that Mrs. Kennedy wanted it very simple.

WILLIAMS: Yes, she did. We thought that we

[-20-]

could arrange the flowers on a hillside, and there was such a number it appeared that you had acres.

TURNURE: Yes, like a blanket of flowers.

WILLIAMS: Yes, like a tremendous blanket of flowers.

TURNURE: As far as having flowers on the grave-site, did Mrs. Kennedy have any feelings on that?

WILLIAMS: Yes, according to Mrs. Mellon, she wanted a basket of flowers placed at the grave made up of flowers from the Rose Garden. And a basket was made up from the Rose Garden and placed at the head of the grave by Mrs. Mellon.

TURNURE: Those were special flowers that he had obviously liked, and that meant a great deal to her.

WILLIAMS: They were the ones, yes, ma'am.

[-21-]

TURNURE: She had really very good taste, didn't she, in flowers?

WILLIAMS: She sure did.

TURNURE: Just the way that she did in art and in other areas.

WILLIAMS: Yes, ma'am.

TURNURE: After the funeral did you see Mrs. Kennedy again before she left the White House?

WILLIAMS: I met Mrs. Kennedy, I believe, about two days after the President was buried. She was with her sister. She asked me at the time whether I still wanted Pushinka. I said that I sure did. She said, "Well, Pushinka is yours forever."

TURNURE: I didn't know that. Do you still have Pushinka?

WILLIAMS: I have Pushinka, yes.

TURNURE: I didn't know that. Well, you'd

[-22-]

better tell who Pushinka is because they might not know the name.

WILLIAMS: Pushinka is the Russian dog given to President and Mrs. Kennedy by Premier Khrushchev. She arrived at the White House in June of '61. Later, in '62, she whelped four puppies at the White House; and Charlie, Caroline's little Welsh terrier, was the father. Later, two of them were given to children out in Michigan or Illinois.

TURNURE: So you still have Pushinka.

WILLIAMS: Yes, ma'am.

TURNURE: How old is she now?

WILLIAMS: She's going on four years old now.

TURNURE: That's very interesting.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-23-]