

Eugene H. Nickerson Oral History Interview – RFK#2, 05/02/1972
Administrative Information

Creator: Eugene H. Nickerson
Interviewer: Roberta Greene
Date of Interview: May 2, 1972
Place of Interview: New York, New York
Length: 14 pages

Biographical Note

Eugene H. Nickerson was the county executive of Nassau County, New York (1962-1970). This interview covers early memories of Robert F. Kennedy [RFK], RFK's 1964 campaign for Senator of New York, and the Senate race of 1968, among other topics.

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Suggested Citation

Eugene H. Nickerson, recorded interview by Roberta Greene, May 2, 1972 (page number), Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

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Eugene H. Nickerson – RFK #2

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
9	First memories of Robert F. Kennedy [RFK]: John F. Kennedy's 1960 campaign, meeting in RFK's Washington, D.C. office, and telephone calls
11	Mitchel Field controversy
11	Seeing RFK: the Long Island Press Awards dinner
12	RFK's 1964 political campaign for Senator of New York
16	Kennedy organization in Nassau County
16	RFK before and after the election of 1964
17	1968 Senate race and RFK's run for President
21	RFK's death and Nickerson's campaign
22	RFK in general and as a New York political figure

Second Oral History Interview

with

EUGENE H. NICKERSON

May 2, 1972

By Roberta Greene

For the Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program
of the Kennedy Library

GREENE: We are going to redo some of the questions from the first time, which we lost because we were recording chamber music. Okay. I guess we should begin at the beginning all over again with your first memories of Robert Kennedy and how the relationship developed.

NICKERSON: First time I think I met him was when he came out in 1960 to speak in his brother's campaign. He spoke at the Garden City Hotel. That's my first recollection of him.

GREENE: And this is after the convention when he was already. . . .

NICKERSON: ~~This is after the convention, yeah. I don't think I met him before the convention in 1960.~~

GREENE: And what was involved in that meeting with him?

NICKERSON: It wasn't a meeting. . . . Well, it was a meeting, I guess. He spoke before a group of Democrats in the Garden City Hotel in Garden City. Basically my recollection of the speech is that he told about how Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] was doing in the campaign in the various states, and so forth. I remember Paul Corbin [Paul J. Corbin] was with him, the notorious Paul Corbin.

GREENE: And what part did he play that day, anything memorable?

NICKERSON: Just, you know, annoying everyone, as was Paul's wont to do. I remember Paul's asking me what district is this that he's in, and I said, "Well, he's speaking to Democrats all throughout the county." He said, "I didn't ask you that. I just asked you what district." He was a kind of a scratchy guy, Paul. I liked him though.

GREENE: Did you have any private conversation with Robert Kennedy on this occasion?

NICKERSON: No. No.

GREENE: Okay, and what was the next?

NICKERSON: Next occasion I met him was down in Washington in his office, in the attorney general's office, and I went with Jack English [John F. English]. Did I say anything different the last time?

GREENE: No, I don't think so. I know that I was asking you all kinds of questions that didn't relate to your experiences, so that's why I'm letting you take the lead, so I don't. . . .

NICKERSON: I went down, met with him with Jack English. One of the subjects of the conversation was whether he, Jack, should become state chairman.

GREENE: Right.

NICKERSON: And I remember urging that I didn't think that he should, and that his talents were needed in Nassau County, and so forth.

GREENE: Did Robert Kennedy press hard for this?

NICKERSON: No. No. Not that I recall. He was just listening.

GREENE: Mm hmm. And is there anything else again, before we get into it. . . Well, I know there was a dinner in 1961.

NICKERSON: Yes. Sixty-one?

GREENE: That's what I have. When Hodges [Luther H. Hodges] came to speak for you in your honor.

NICKERSON: Hodges came, but Kennedy didn't.

GREENE: No, but did the Kennedys have anything to do with. . . .

NICKERSON: It might be that that was arranged through them. I'm not sure of that.

GREENE: As a token of support. Did they do anything else to help you out?

NICKERSON: Not particularly. Oh, I remember I received a call--I think I told you about this last time--the day after election in 1961 from Robert Kennedy congratulating me on my election in 1961. That was a very short conversation.

Now the next time that I saw him, if you want me to go into that, was when he came to speak--I think it was 1964--at the Long Island Press Awards [Long Island Daily Press Distinguished Service Award] dinner . . .

GREENE: What about. . . .

NICKERSON: . . . with Jack English.

GREENE: Just to back up, what about the Mitchel Field controversy? We discussed that last time.

NICKERSON: Yes, but I don't remember his playing, particularly, a role in that. I did go down, speak to Dick Maguire [Richard Maguire] and to Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] and some others in the White House with respect to Mitchel Field, to try and get that for Nassau County, or try and get more of it for Nassau County.

GREENE: But he didn't. . . .

NICKERSON: Well, I don't recall him in any of the meetings, and I'm sure I would recall if he had been there.

GREENE: Okay. And what about the Suffolk County leadership fight? Did you have any association. . . .

NICKERSON: No, no. I told you last time, no.

GREENE: Okay. I must admit that I'm vague, because we couldn't get anything off the other one and I just don't remember what we covered or not.

NICKERSON: Right, of course.

GREENE: Okay. Excuse me for interrupting. We can pick up in. . . .

NICKERSON: Then the next time, I think, was in 1964 in, might have been, September of '64, or around in there, September or October, when he came to speak at a dinner, which is the Long Island Press Awards dinner, which was that year given to Jack English. Robert Kennedy was, I think. . . . Among others at that dinner was Joe Carlino [Joseph F. Carlino] who was the speaker of the assembly and a Republican. And he attempted to embarrass Robert Kennedy because the Nassau Democratic County Committee had come out for off-track betting. And Kennedy had made some public statements that were contrary to that, and the Republican position was contrary to off-track betting. Carlino's speech basically was, he was delighted to see Bob Kennedy there who was against off-track betting. It was one of those things. Kennedy kind of turned it off with a quip. I then drove with Kennedy back to LaGuardia [Airport] to the shuttle after that dinner and we talked some. That was '64, I think. Tell you who was with him then, and that was Harry Golden, at that trip.

GREENE: That was one of the few things that we did pick up. Just the fact that you'd gone to the airport, and that Harry Golden was present.

NICKERSON: Yeah.

GREENE: Yes.

NICKERSON: And we discussed some about my reelection. That couldn't have been '64.

GREENE: I think it was earlier because. . . .

NICKERSON: Because he was campaigning in '64.

GREENE: Right.

NICKERSON: It had to be '63.

GREENE: Okay, before the. . . .

NICKERSON: Yeah. It had to be '63. Did it not? Yeah, it had to be before '64, that I know.

GREENE: Okay.

NICKERSON: It had to be '63 and we discussed my prospects for reelection. We discussed Carlino.

GREENE: Did he say anything about that incident?

NICKERSON: He did, but I can't recall what. It wasn't of any significance. He asked me about Carlino, what kind of a fellow he was. I can't remember anything much else.

GREENE: I know we discussed in terms of 1964 and his decision to run. There were some things, and after the decision was made there was a meeting out at Glen Cove [New York].

NICKERSON: Yes, that's right.

GREENE: Yes.

NICKERSON: There were several meetings at Glen Cove. He had rented a house out in Glen Cove, and there were several meetings, one of which I think we discussed last time, had to do with his position on busing.

GREENE: Busing, right.

NICKERSON: And I remember writing something out for him with respect to busing, some of which was used. And remember seeing him the next morning and talking about his own campaign, and telling. . . . He had been on television I think the previous night, and some reporter had asked him what he was going to do, and basically his answer was that he was going to run around the state and try and get elected. And I remember telling him that I didn't think that that was the right posture for his public statements to be in, that people were really not interested in whether he was senator or not. From their own personal standpoint they were interested in what was going to happen to them. He had to be serious about it. "Well, no one's going to suppose," he said laughing, "that I'm not serious." And we discussed some about that. Let's see.

GREENE: How did you find him on criticism, constructive criticism of that kind? Did he welcome it?

NICKERSON: Yes.

GREENE: He didn't mind it?

NICKERSON: No. But this was one-on-one, you know. There wasn't anyone else there. So I can't make a judgment on a larger group. Then he was in and around in that campaign, saw him quite a bit, particularly when he came to Nassau County, which he did. And that was his home, in theory, his home. There's a good deal, if you'll recall, on that campaign about how a boy, a fellow from Glen Cove, how if you worked hard and so forth you'd eventually make it. A local boy. . . .

GREENE: With his New York accent, his Glen Cove accent.

NICKERSON: New York, Glen Cove accent. I remember we went riding around in motorcades, and so forth. The thing that I remember about that campaign in particular, one of the things that was interesting that I hadn't noticed before, and that was that he had a tape machine strapped to his back. Did you know that?

GREENE: No.

NICKERSON: So that his speeches were recorded.

GREENE: I didn't know that.

NICKERSON: And they were all recorded as he spoke to them, spoke to folks.

GREENE: He used it only for his formal presentations, or. . . .

NICKERSON: No, it seemed to be. . . . Because I remember him taking it off, which was interesting to me because I didn't realize that. Of course there were tremendous crowds at first. Let's see. But

the thing that I remember most about that campaign was the final day, or rather the final Sunday before elections, when President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson]. . . .

GREENE: Johnson came up.

NICKERSON: . . . came, and Johnson landed at Republic [Republic Aviation Corporation] airfield. Kennedy and I, I guess, met him there. And Harriman [W. Averell Harriman] was there and some others.

And then we rode--I'm told that it was in the same car, that had been rebuilt, that President Kennedy had ridden in. And there was the president, Johnson, Mrs. Ethel Kennedy [Ethel Skakel Kennedy], and Mrs. Johnson [Claudia Taylor Johnson], myself, and Robert Kennedy. Rufus Youngblood up in the front, and whoever was driving. And we drove from Republic airfield, which was in Suffolk [County], through the entire Nassau County. And by then, if it was the same car, it had been built with a bubble top, so you were entirely enclosed in it. Johnson spent his entire time reading to us the polls in the various states, and while he was reading these poll results, waving out the window with his right hand, and he expressed concern if he was below 58 percent in any state. Then I remember we had some joshing on the way. Bob Kennedy saying to Ethel, "This is"--wherever, Franklin Square. "You remember Franklin Square." You know that kind of thing, as if he had been a real native of Nassau. The other thing that sticks in my mind about that. . . . There's a couple other things. There was a discussion by Johnson that Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater]. . . . Did I tell you about this?

GREENE: That he was going to pull something at the last minute? Yes.

NICKERSON: Pull something terrible at the last minute, and that it was going to be something similar to the . . .

GREENE: Jenkins [Walter Jenkins].

NICKERSON: To the Jenkins case. He said he'd spoken to J. Edgar Hoover, and Johnson said, and that Hoover said you could tell a homosexual by the way he walked. And Kennedy said, "Well, what does that mean, that you'll watch the cabinet carefully as they walk into the cabinet meeting?" And he said, "Well one thing I can assure you of, Mr. President, it isn't me." The other thing, I remember Mrs. Johnson saying how much they hoped they'd carry the southern states, particularly Georgia. That's about the substance of it.

GREENE: Could you get any feeling for how Robert Kennedy felt about being in this situation? Did he seem uncomfortable? You make it sound like he didn't.

NICKERSON: Didn't seem uncomfortable, no.

GREENE: Yes.

NICKERSON: Not at that time. I remember Kennedy telephoning Jack English, and Jack very much urging Kennedy to have Johnson come up to New York with Kennedy because the polls looked as if Johnson would carry the state by a tremendous margin, and that it would be helpful to Kennedy. And as a matter of fact, Kennedy, you recall, did not. . . . He carried the state but I think by some seven-hundred-odd thousand . . .

GREENE: Much less than Johnson.

NICKERSON: . . . and Johnson carried by over two million. In fact, in Nassau County Kennedy lost the county by, I think it was, thirty thousand votes, something on that order, while I carried it by ninety-four thousand, ninety-five thousand, something on that order, and Johnson carried it by even more, if I recall correctly.

GREENE: Is there anything that you think they should have done in Nassau that they didn't do that you were advising them to do, and that could have changed the picture somewhat, or was it just the kind of community it was?

NICKERSON: No, you see, Kennedy got cut up in the liberal areas such as Great Neck and Roslyn [New York], and also in the Five Towns. And I doubt there was anything he could do about that. Keating [Kenneth B. Keating] was popular, and so forth. No, I doubt it.

GREENE: I remember one thing you said last time which I've thought several times since, and I think it is worth mentioning . . .

NICKERSON: That's very flattering, Roberta.

GREENE: . . . was that you emphasized the fact that you didn't think anybody could help anybody else in an election. Because I kept asking you, you know, "You were so much stronger than Kennedy, how much. . . ."

NICKERSON: I don't really think so, because at the You can do it with an unknown. I mean for example, the Silverman [Samuel J. Silverman] campaign for surrogate, here in the city. No one knew what a surrogate was, I mean the general public . . .

GREENE: Or a Silverman.

NICKERSON: . . . and obviously no one knew who Silverman was. And there you could focus public attention on it which otherwise wouldn't have been on it, and therefore people wouldn't have known about it. And it was more of an issue-oriented thing than it was a personal thing. But once you have someone who is well known, what can you. . . . It's a very limited amount that anyone now, with the media. . . . Let's just check this, Roberta.

GREENE: Okay.

[Interruption]

Is there anything else about the campaign in '64, or specifically in Nassau that. . . .

NICKERSON: I don't really think so, that would be all that interesting.

GREENE: Okay. One thing I might ask you is what you thought of the Kennedy organization there, and the way it was put together, if you felt that everything was done that could have been.

NICKERSON: Well, I don't think they had, you know, the organization in Nassau County, because they had great confidence in Jack English. I don't believe there was too much of a separate organization in Nassau.

GREENE: Okay. I think that that would bring us practically up to the time where we. . . .

NICKERSON: Practically up to date, huh?

GREENE: Yes.

NICKERSON: Until after election.

GREENE: And then we moved and we got involved in a lengthy discussion of the governor's race. But that was all recorded.

NICKERSON: Yeah. But before you do that, you might be interested in. . . . One of the things that he did that I felt was good was, right after election and before he actually took office, he met with folks around the state. And among others I arranged a meeting out in the county executive building, for him to meet people in Nassau County and basically to listen to them. Nassau and Suffolk, I think is was. And I had there the major people in the county in terms of business and government, and so forth. Mostly business in the private sector, although I think the Suffolk County executive, Dennison [H. Lee Dennison], was there. And I thought that was good.

GREENE: Do you think he did well under those conditions? That kind of a meeting?

NICKERSON: Yes, I thought he was good at that. He showed an interest. We had several of those while he was in the Senate, at that time and thereafter.

GREENE: Okay. I hope that we covered the rest. . . . You know, the rest of it was recorded. According to my assistants. . . .

NICKERSON: It was, so let's not. . . .

GREENE: . . . it was, so we . . .

NICKERSON: Good, you have assistants. That's terrific.

GREENE: That you can call on in an emergency. Anyway, since we got that whole in between chunk, the next and very last thing I think we've got to talk about is '68 and particularly the Senate race.

NICKERSON: Sixty-eight? We talked about '66. You've got that.

GREENE: Right. The governor's race.

NICKERSON: Sixty-eight. Yeah, well, that's. . . . Sixty-eight.

GREENE: Well.

NICKERSON: Well.

GREENE: Where I would begin is with the early discussions about the Senate nomination.

NICKERSON: Well, there weren't really any about the Senate nomination. Did we discuss his coming out to Great Neck to that lunch at the Garden City Hotel, "Fall Guy" Luncheon?

GREENE: ~~RE:~~ Where he more or less told everyone that he was running?

NICKERSON: ~~RE:~~ Well, yeah. There was an open mike, and so forth.

GREENE: With Leonard Hall, yes. No, we didn't. I've heard it elsewhere, but I'd like to. . . .

NICKERSON: Well, I don't know anything that everyone else doesn't, I assure you. I remember we, his coming to Great Neck. It was to the Richmond [Anita Richmond] . . .

GREENE: Home?

NICKERSON: . . . home, yeah. There were a bunch of women there, and he talked to them. And then I rode over in the car with him to the Garden City Hotel to this luncheon. He asked me if I would help him, which I said I would, and what I thought of McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy], whether McCarthy would make it. And I told him I thought he wouldn't and that Robert was right to run.

GREENE: Mm hmm. Was this the first time he had asked your opinion?

NICKERSON: About whether he should run?

GREENE: Yes.

NICKERSON: He'd only decided that day.

GREENE: Yes, but it had been debated.

NICKERSON: No, he never had. No, he hadn't before. Then we went over after that luncheon, started calling people, you know, around the state. He called from democratic headquarters. He went over to a reception at Westbury Manor, if I recall correctly. He was calling people around the country. The Senate thing, I never discussed with him. I discussed that with Jack English, and with several of the other political leaders.

GREENE: Now do you mean even prior to the time that Sutton [Percy E. Sutton] dropped out, you had never discussed the senate candidacy?

NICKERSON: No, I discussed Sutton with Robert and I said that I thought Sutton would run. And I had talked to Sutton about running.

GREENE: How early would you say that was?

NICKERSON: Before Kennedy got into it.

GREENE: That makes it January or February.

NICKERSON: I've forgotten the precise dates. When did he announce for the presidency? March?

GREENE: Oh, March 16, yes.

NICKERSON: March 16. So it would have been several weeks before that. Sutton came out to my office with Badillo [Herman Badillo], and I told Sutton I thought he ought to make a try for it. He was willing to do it, but one of the things that . . . He had no money, and he needed money and we talked about that. Matter of fact, I think we might have talked the fifteenth, that day, about it. And he called Sutton. I think he called Sutton right from democratic headquarters. He did, now that I recall. He said, "Are you all set to go?" and so forth, on it. And then Sutton soon thereafter dropped out and Kennedy was left without a candidate. The only two candidates were . . .

GREENE: Resnick [Joseph Y. Resnick] and Pike [Otis G. Pike].

NICKERSON: . . . Resnick and Pike, both of whom were, in varying degrees, hawks. And I talked to several of the political leaders or they talked to me. I told them I'd be willing to run, but I didn't

talk to him. Kennedy tried to call me, and never did reach me. And the only time I think I saw him to speak to him was in Atlanta, Georgia at the Martin Luther King [Martin Luther King, Jr.] funeral, and we walked along together, and so forth. But it was just, you know, obviously we didn't have a discussion.

GREENE: Was that conversation with him on the 15th the only time you discussed the nomination . . .

NICKERSON: Yeah, I think so.

GREENE: . . . for the Senate? Was he satisfied with Sutton? Was he someone he thought. . . .

NICKERSON: Oh, you mean. . . .

GREENE: Just generally had you discussed the nomination and who he supported, and. . . .

NICKERSON: No, no, we just discussed that Sutton would be good. And he called Sutton. He said after the phone call that Sutton didn't commit himself with respect to him at that time.

GREENE: Now, one of the main reasons that's been given for Sutton's dropping out was that he couldn't get the liberal backing.

NICKERSON: I don't know about that.

GREENE: Oh, I was wondering if you knew. . . .

NICKERSON: I doubt that's true.

GREENE: No.

NICKERSON: I would doubt it. I have no knowledge.

GREENE: Why do you say that?

NICKERSON: Because I think he would, in my recollection.

GREENE: He would have gotten. . . .

NICKERSON: Yeah.

GREENE: I guess you were away at the time so you probably don't know any efforts that might have been made to keep Sutton going, to prevent him from dropping out.

NICKERSON: You mean by Kennedy?

GREENE: Yes, or his people, of course.

NICKERSON: I just don't know anything about that.

GREENE: Who actually called you and first asked you to run? Was it Jack English?

NICKERSON: Well, I think the first conversation I had was with Jack, yeah.

GREENE: Mm hmm. And that was when you were in the Virgin Islands or somewhere?

NICKERSON: Was I in the Virgin Islands?

GREENE: That's the way I've heard it. I don't know if that's. . . .

NICKERSON: No, I went down to the Virgin Islands after that. I had planned to go to the Virgin Islands, but I didn't. I'd planned to go a day or two before the state committee meeting, but I didn't go.

GREENE: You were actually in town, then, when. . . . Oh, I didn't realize that.

NICKERSON: I was in Mineola [New York].

GREENE: Okay. Was there a lot of persuading that went into this, or did you agree to run as soon as you were asked?

NICKERSON: It seemed to me that it just wasn't right for the state of New York to have as its candidate--particularly if Kennedy was going to be the candidate for president--two people, both of whom were hawks, vying for the nomination and that someone. . . . This was before, mind you, that O'Dwyer [Paul O'Dwyer] got into the picture.

GREENE: Right.

NICKERSON: And there was a good deal of talk that he wouldn't get into the picture at all. I didn't suppose that he would at that time. But in any event, so that it seemed a worthwhile objective to me. I didn't have any illusions at that time of beating Javits [Jacob K. Javits]. One did not assume that O'Dwyer would win because he wasn't even in the picture. In fact, even after he got into the picture it wasn't assumed that he would.

GREENE: Yes, right.

NICKERSON: And he gave very serious consideration. And I talked to O'Dwyer as to whether he really was going to, and he wasn't decided.

GREENE: Do you think he would have been someone that Kennedy could have gone with, been satisfied with?

NICKERSON: I don't know. He was very heavily committed to McCarthy.

GREENE: Right.

NICKERSON: And I think as far as his views were concerned, he would. But he was very heavily committed to McCarthy and to McCarthy's campaign.

GREENE: Yes. That's what I thought, but the way you stated it, it made it sound as if he would have been an acceptable alternative.

NICKERSON: I think in terms of his views that he would have been, and at that time O'Dwyer wasn't a factor, you see.

GREENE: Well, did you ask for any, or were any commitments given, when you did agree to do this since it was. . . .

NICKERSON: No.

GREENE: No. The Kennedys didn't offer . . .

NICKERSON: No.

GREENE: . . . support of any kind?

NICKERSON: No. Oh, you mean in terms of monetary?

GREENE: Yes, and Robert Kennedy's campaigning with you, and that kind of thing?

NICKERSON: Oh, well, that was assumed that they would campaign. I mean that was assumed by me at least, and I think by everyone else. And Jack English talked in terms of their contributing to the campaign in terms of money. Which they would have done if Kennedy. . . . You know, the campaign really never took hold because Kennedy was shot and he would have spent those two weeks in New York campaigning. So that, you know, that Senate candidacy of mine really went down the drain, because there was absolutely no campaign there. And the plan was to campaign throughout the state.

GREENE: You were still a candidate even though Robert Kennedy was dead. Was there any feeling on your part that the Kennedy people should have done more for you after that than they did? That they kind of. . . .

NICKERSON: No.

GREENE: No. Well, is there anything else on the Senate. . . .

NICKERSON: No, I don't think so.

GREENE: You want to comment in conclusion on your thoughts about Robert Kennedy in general and specifically as a New York political figure?

NICKERSON: I think I covered it pretty well. I don't know what's to add. He was a bit of a paradox, I guess. As far as the state of New York was concerned, he was looking forward, at the time that he was elected in 1964, to what would happen in 1970. And he had really no thought at that time of the presidential campaign so that. . . . I think I covered everything, Roberta, unless you think of something else.

GREENE: Yes, I thought more really in terms of the breach that might have been left in the state leadership, and that kind of thing, and how you saw that affecting the New York scene.

NICKERSON: A U.S. senator generally doesn't have much control over the political machinery, to whatever good that is in any event. I mean, he's got no patronage and so forth. Someone like Robert Kennedy obviously had a personal influence on it, and sometimes he used that and sometimes he didn't. And in 1966, for example, he didn't. But we've been over that.

GREENE: Right. Okay, I guess that's all.