

Issac Avery Oral History Interview – 5/12/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Issac Avery

Interviewer: Pamela Turnure and Nancy Tuckerman

Date of Interview: May 12, 1964

Place of Interview: Washington, D.C.

Length: 22 pages

Biographical Note

Avery, White House carpenter foreman during the Kennedy Administration, discusses his workload during the Kennedy Administration as compared to other Administrations, his working relationship with Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, and his thoughts on President John F. Kennedy's assassination.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed on November 1, 1966, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Issac Avery, recorded interview by Pamela Turnure and Nancy Tuckerman, May 12, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Isaac Avery

A. Statement of Gift

In accordance with the provisions of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 as amended (63 Stat. 377) and regulations issued thereunder, I, Isaac Avery, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

B. Terms and Conditions

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder and all literary property rights will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.
2. It is the donor's wish to make the material donated to the United States of America by the terms of this instrument available for research as soon as it has been deposited in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.
3. A revision of the above stipulation governing access to the aforesaid material may be entered into between the donor and the Archivist of the United States or his designee if it appears desirable to revise the conditions herein stipulated.

Signed

Isaac M. Avery

Date

October 30, 1966

Accepted

Ronald H. Deumer

Archivist of the United States

Date

Nov 1 1966

Issac Avery

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	History of Avery's service as White House carpenter
2, 10	Working relationship with Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy
5	Impressions of President John F. Kennedy (JFK)
9, 12, 17	Workload during the Kennedy Administration as compared to other presidential administrations
14, 19	Specific examples of carpentry work during the Kennedy Administration
20	Thoughts on the JFK assassination

Oral History Interview

with

Isaac Avery

May 12, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Pamela Turnure and Nancy Tuckerman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TURNURE: This will be an interview with Mr. Isaac Avery, White House carpenter foreman, is that your correct title, Mr. Avery?

AVERY: That's correct, Miss Turnure. I'm flattered to be asked to record some of my thoughts for the Kennedy Library.

TURNURE: How long have you been at the White House, Mr. Avery?

AVERY: Miss Turnure, I came to the White House in 1930, December.

[-1-]

TURNURE: So how many administrations would you have served?

AVERY: That makes this present administration number 6.

TURNURE: And could you tell us a little bit about when the President [John F. Kennedy] and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] moved into the White House? That must have kept you very busy.

AVERY: When Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy moved into the White House, the normal preparations for a new family moving in had been made, but for the first time we were faced with the necessity of providing for a family with small children. The customary job of moving the Presidential family's personal possessions in was taking place under normal procedures, but immediate changes had to be made in the House to accommodate the children particularly, and the convenience of Mrs. Kennedy in

[-2-]

looking after them. Bedrooms were to be altered, dining rooms to be altered, playrooms to be supplied, and nursery school equipment to be installed, that sort of thing.

TURNURE: Did Mrs. Kennedy go over these plans with you personally? Was she there directing the operation? Did she sit down with you? Where did you get your instructions?

AVERY: Our instructions under those circumstances come to us usually through the office of the chief usher, and Mrs. Kennedy's contacts with us were made in the early days mostly through him. That is the way those things normally work here in the White House.

TURNURE: Did she come up to see how the work was progressing? I know that they were living in the private quarters at

[-3-]

the same time that you were actually working on the other side of the House.

AVERY: Oh yes, Mrs. Kennedy came in frequently to keep herself informed as to how much progress we were making. Usually it is our wish to get a family into the House and happy as quickly as we can.

TURNURE: How did she impress you as a person when you first saw her?

AVERY: My first impression of Mrs. Kennedy was, to be perfectly frank, that here is a young woman who has a lot to learn about an institution like this. But she learned it rapidly and gracefully.

TURNURE: And she was very interested in learning, wasn't she?

AVERY: Very interested in doing it, indeed.

TURNURE: And easy to work with?

AVERY: Oh yes. Not only easy to work with, but happy to work with you.

[-4-]

TURNURE: You sort of felt that she was very enthusiastic about it?

AVERY: She was enthusiastic, and her dreams about what she wished to do with the White House are wonderful in retrospect. It could be that some of us are opposed to certain things that were done, but that becomes a personal matter. In the final analysis, we have to consider it from the standpoint of the welfare of the institution and the happiness of the American public.

TURNURE: Do you happen to remember the first time you met the President? Was that right after the Inauguration or before?

AVERY: I had never met the President before the Inauguration. It would have \ been a couple weeks after the Inauguration before I actually had a chance to be with him and say hello.

[-5-]

TURNURE: Yes. Were you involved in the decoration of his office? I know there were a lot of paintings which Mrs. Kennedy selected when Kennedy moved in. Were you there when this moving and hanging of paintings was being done?

AVERY: Indeed I was.

TURNURE: You were hanging them. And was the President there? And was he interested in where they would go?

AVERY: No, he was not there at the time. I did most of my work in the office because, as has been our custom, we try to do that sort of work at a moment when it is most convenient to him. His use of his office must be available at all times so that we take advantage of opportunities when he is out.

TURNURE: Which would be on a Sunday?

AVERY: Or weekends, or the evening, or anytime

[-6-]

that he is somewhere else.

TURNURE: I remember those first few weekends the President and Mrs. Kennedy used to spend exploring the White House and the office areas.

AVERY: Yes, I know. There must be a lot of curiosity on the part of any First Family when they come in as to the layout and plans of this old institution, where various facilities are located, and who occupies those facilities. They would be curious about that. Actually, I know of many times that the President or the First Lady, or both, have taken a walk over the House to see the shops, escorted by the chief usher or by someone who knows their way around, and you may be caught at work, or you may be caught outside.

TURNURE: What stands out in your mind about your

[-7-]

meetings with the President on the times that you were working when he was there?

AVERY: One of the things that stands out with regard to Mr. Kennedy, or President Kennedy I should say, is that he could come into the room where you were working and go ahead and carry on his normal activity, be it work, conversation, or family relationship, and completely ignore your presence.

TURNURE: That's interesting.

AVERY: It was a facility which he had which actually is beneficial to us.

TURNURE: What about the children [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy and John F. Kennedy, Jr.]? Did you have much contact with them?

AVERY: Not a whole lot. The children were too small, actually, to be interested in the personalities who make the House tick, or who do certain things for them

[-8-]

that they don't know much about. They spent their time in the company of their nurse and mother, and both of those two ladies did a lot to keep them out from under our feet.

TUCKERMAN: Would you say that working with Mrs. Kennedy, or under that Administration, kept you busier than any others because of her restoration of the White House?

AVERY: Miss Tuckerman, I have had varied experience in the White House

going back prior to and throughout the reconstruction of 1948 to '52. Those were extremely busy years. But the early days of the Kennedy Administration, in fact the entire time, was just about as busy as the prior one. We're even busier now.

TUCKERMAN: So it's continual, no matter what administration. The work is always there to be done.

[-9-]

AVERY: The work is always there to be done. There will be a little variation in volume because some families have a tendency to settle down and live a little more evenly than the Kennedys did. The Kennedys lived in a hurry President Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] lives in a race -- and that's it. Mr. Truman [Harry S. Truman] took life easy; Mr. Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] did once he remembered that his staff was not a military one.

TUCKERMAN: That's a very interesting observation.

TURNURE: I know that you did a lot of things for Mrs. Kennedy in terms of framing the many pictures she collected. Was she a thoughtful person? Was she quick to praise or to thank or even to criticize if something wasn't so?

AVERY: Invariably so.

TURNURE: Did she write notes to you? How did she do this?

[-11-]

AVERY: Yes. She had a habit of writing little notes, and she would also pick up her phone and call you. Usually if it was not quite satisfactory, you'd get the note. If she was quite happy, you'd get the phone call.

TURNURE: But she certainly had definite ideas of her own, didn't she, as far as picture framing, or didn't she like some kind of French frames?

AVERY: Very definitely. Usually her choices were the type of moldings, the type of finishes that carried the French label.

TURNURE: And how would she show you this? Would she draw you a picture? Would she pick it out herself?

AVERY: Sometimes she would draw a little sketch; sometimes she would ask you to bring her some samples; sometimes she would

[-11-]

take the samples and change the color.

TURNURE: Mr. Avery, you said at the beginning of this interview that this would be the sixth Administration that you've seen. Are there similarities between administrations and the pace they follow that you've observed?

AVERY: Yes, there are similarities, particularly in the early days of an administration. The process of moving in and becoming happy in the White House is the prime object of the family and the hope of the staff. Invariably there is a rush the first two or three months, and usually in that time we have the new family in a happy condition. We have the House to where it suits their needs, their favorite furnishings are where they want them, and usually the President's office will be satisfactory by that time so that they

[-12-]

can then settle down to live and work and be happy.

TURNURE: Now, is this settling down period over several months, or has this been accomplished more quickly in the case of one administration over another? I'm interested in the last two administrations.

AVERY: Yes. The last two administrations, that is President Kennedy and President Johnson have been, in my mind, very unsettled all the way through. There was little evidence during the Kennedy Administration that the family had actually settled down. In other words, the House apparently was never completely quite satisfactory. His office was satisfactory, but the House itself underwent constant change the entire time.

TURNURE: Now part of this was connected with Mrs. Kennedy's restoration work.

[-13-]

AVERY: That is quite correct. Part of it was restoration work, and part of it was, shall we say, a personal habit of hers of loving to change things in a house as lots of housewives do. Moving pictures, shifting furniture and Jack comes home in the evening and maybe his chair isn't exactly where it was.

TURNURE: Could you show us evidences of this as you were moving the

pictures?

AVERY: Oh, yes, the evidence was quite clear and obvious.

TURNURE: Was this mainly in their own apartment or also in....

AVERY: Not only in their own apartment but in the State floor of the House as well. The various portraits of the ex-Presidents of the United States were shifted and moved frequently -- sometimes to the same place they were before.

[-14-]

TURNURE: Because of the many changes Mrs. Kennedy made in the White House, there obviously must have been a great deal of public interest in seeing the House and an increase in the number of tourists who visited it. How did this affect your work?

AVERY: The biggest effect that it has on our work is to greatly increase its volume. First let me admit that there was a great increase in the number of sightseers early in the Administration. That is quite normal. People are curious. But President and Mrs. Kennedy invited the American public to continue the pace that they were following, and the American public accepted. Our work was actually affected quite strongly by this because the increasing crowds must be controlled; they must be guided and

[-15-]

steered and kept within the areas that we hope to keep them in. In other words, they have to be policed and guided. Now, the additional volume also makes additional housework to keep the place clean and presentable and looking the way the American public expects to find it the next morning when they come in.

TURNURE: Were there also things going on in the afternoon, after the tourist hours, that affected your work?

AVERY: Yes, frequently. Anytime that the President or the First Lady would like to use the state parlors or dining rooms or theatre or lower floors of the House at all, they must be presentable.

TURNURE: Did they frequently use the lower floors during the day and the state rooms for entertaining and receptions?

[-16-]

AVERY: Yes. Luncheons, receptions, short little conferences where the topics to be discussed were of interest other than personal. If it were personal they'd take their guests to the private quarters. But the red and green parlors, for instance must always be presentable so that people can go in to be served tea, sit and chat, and the place must show no evidence of having been used for any other purpose.

TURNURE: Did it seem to you that the Kennedys entertained more than the past administration?

AVERY: It is always true that early in an administration the family always does a lot of entertaining in the first 12 months. They feel that they have obligations that they hope to clear for friends, political allies -- the ones that helped them achieve their status.

[-17-]

And at the same time, they help to maintain the old, traditional events which the White House has lived through for years and years. They may be altered somewhat, but most of them are maintained in some form. Yet almost every family has a tendency to add another tradition or two to the list, with the result that as the years go by and the administrations pile up in number, the functions do also.

TURNURE: What good functions did the Kennedys add which might become traditions?

AVERY: I don't know that they had any particular type of function which might become traditional. Their state dinners and the entertainments that followed were an improvement over the years gone by due to the staging facilities which we normally used in the East Room. Prior to this administration, we had never

[-18-]

had anything other than a platform without wings, without backdrops, and without sound equipment.

TURNURE: What did the Kennedys have? A stage or...

AVERY: Yes. We built a stage complete with wings and backdrops that could be used to accommodate almost any sort of entertainment -- a small stage for one or two artists, a larger stage for a larger group, or a stage big enough to put on a ballet.

TURNURE: But before that, there'd just been a platform?

AVERY: Just a platform or no stage at all. The only semblance that I can recall was during the Roosevelt [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] time. We hung a curtain across the East Room all the way across in front of the platform, and two of us upon cue opened and closed the curtain. But sound equipment –

[-19-]

recording equipment -- had never been used in the East Room prior to the Kennedy time.

TUCKERMAN: Mr. Avery, could you tell us what lasting impressions you have of last fall when the President was assassinated?

AVERY: Miss Tuckerman, yes I can. Lay aside the normal reactions of shock and surprise, the grief -- those things we all felt. Out of this comes to me two very definite thoughts: one of nationwide significance; the other a peculiar thought which is going to have to be entertained by every succeeding President of the United States, or any ruler for that matter. Let's take them in order.

The first and biggest impression is the need for a reevaluation of the civilization in which we live. Four times within one hundred years this

[-20-]

incredible event has happened in the United States. Yet we are taught that we live in the highest civilization that has ever developed on this earth. But to find a record of equal horror, we have to go back and study the history of some rather savage nations. The second impression is this: every President of the United States from now on is going to have to reevaluate the status of his personal courage and his own value to the people of the United States and to the people of the world, as long as we remain a world power. He is going to have to feel an obligation to live the full length of his elected term. He is going to have to learn to live in safety even if it calls for being almost completely

[-21-]

aloof from the American public. It's regrettable, but it could happen again.

TUCKER: Quite true.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-22-]

Issac Avery Oral History Transcript
Name List

E

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 11

J

Johnson, Lyndon Baines, 11, 13

K

Kennedy, Caroline Bouvier, 8

Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10,
13, 15, 16

Kennedy, John F., 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 13, 14, 15, 16, 20

Kennedy, John F., Jr., 8

R

Roosevelt, Franklin Delano, 19

T

Truman, Harry S., 11