

**Mary S. Colbert Oral History Interview—5/5/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Mary S. Colbert  
**Interviewer:** Mary Tierney  
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**Biographical Note**

Colbert, the co-chairman of John F. Kennedy's (JFK) first congressional campaign in Charlestown, Massachusetts (1946), discusses organizing JFK's 1946 and 1952 Charlestown campaign headquarters, her personal relationship with JFK, and his inauguration, among other issues.

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May 6, 1968

Mary S. Colbert

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Oral History Interview

with

Mary S. Colbert

May 5, 1964

Charlestown, Massachusetts

By Mary Tierney

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TIERNEY: Mrs. Colbert, could you tell us something about your first meeting with Jack Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

COLBERT: I would be most happy to. On a Monday morning, I would say, Mr. Colbert happened to be looking out the window on High Street and up Wood Street came this tall, young looking fellow, hatless. He crossed the street, and as he did, Mr. Colbert said, "That looks like a young Kennedy fellow coming across." And with that, our doorbell rang. Mr. Colbert pressed the button and up came this young man, and he said to Mr. Colbert, "Is this the house of Mary Colbert?" And he said, "That's right. She's right in there. Go in." He came in. We had a hassock, rather a tall one, in the middle of our den around which are many mementos of Jack Kennedy, the President. He sat down, and he said, "I have been told to come to Charlestown to see you and see what you thought of my candidacy for either the lieutenant governorship or for Congress." He said, "We do have a local candidate in your district and also in Cambridge and another in East Boston." He said, "What do you think about the political situation?" I said, "Well, having known your father [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] many years back when he went to Boston Latin and I went to Girls High back in 1904, I would say I think you would do best to go into the Congress." "Well," he said, "I haven't made up my mind, but I will think it over, and when I have made up my mind, I will give you a telephone call."

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Perhaps ten day afterward I received a call to come to the Hotel Bellevue, at that time where Jack resided, and I was ushered into the room. And he said, "I have made up my mind, and I am going into the Congress. Now, we are going to open a headquarters in the different areas, and I would like on in Charlestown. In the meantime, I have interviewed Dave Powers [David F. Powers] (who was one of his original men in Charlestown), and Dave and you will head up the Charlestown organization," which was established on Main Street in Charlestown. We opened it up on Main and Walker Streets. Then, to get the organization set, I had called the different ladies in Charlestown that had been present with us, and Mark Dalton [Mark J. Dalton] who was acting as Jack's chairman in Boston came over to tell us how to organize. Having met Mark on several occasions previously, I said to him, "This is you first political campaign, is it not, Mark?" He said, "That's right, we're all new who are working with Mr. Kennedy for the Congress." I said, "Well, you won't ever need to give us any instructions in Charlestown. I think we are all very well acquainted with the procedure of setting up an organization." So that we did.

TIERNEY: Had you set up other political organizations before this?

COLBERT: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Many times. For Congressman Flaherty [Thomas A. Flaherty], I had been the chairlady when he ran for Congress. So we set the headquarters up, and we did have girls and men, several men in the district who came to help us nights. And Mr. Kennedy visited our headquarters, his father, on several occasions to look the place over and see what it was. And during his remarks.... Even today what we're fighting for in this district is the removal of the Boston elevated through our district. He stood there and talked to Mr. Colbert that night, and he said, "Oh, that should have come down years ago!" Those words reflect back today when we think of what we're still trying to do in Charlestown.

Well, it was a happy night for us when several of our leaders in the district that were not our way, that were obligated to men who perhaps were opposing Mr. Kennedy for Congress, to see the vote that was rolled up on that day. Everybody put their shoulders to the wheel to see that he did get the vote that he

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should and was entitled to. Personally, I think that the late President was one man who never really ever lost the human touch. When the election was over, of course, we know that he was busy for the few weeks afterward. But on New Year's Eve of 1946, he wrote a letter to me which I will always cherish, in which he said, "This is a long belated letter. I should have written you before. But I could not let this year go by (in '46) without extending my thanks to you. Perhaps one of the choicest things I have received from politics was the friendship of you and Syl. I hope in the near future to meet you and to thank you personally."

From then on there were others who became affiliated with Mr. Kennedy, and shortly afterward he became the main speaker of the Knights of Columbus banquet the night before [March] the 17<sup>th</sup> in 1947. It always requires that the man who speaks on the day we celebrate

should be a member of the Bunker Hill Council. Therefore, he had become a member of the Bunker Hill Council of the Knights of Columbus, and it was Mr. Colbert's choice in talking to the Grand Knight, who was Warren McCullough, that it would be nice if they had him speak. This was perhaps just a little ahead of time that I'm speaking now or before time because it was in '46, before he even ran, that he was speaker in Bunker Hill Council and spoke on the day we celebrate, and on the same evening Senator Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge], who was a candidate for the United States Senate, was a speaker on the national line. It was quite a coincidence, and present with me today is Mary McNeeley who was at our table where Mr. Colbert had invited Mrs. Kennedy [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy] and Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] to partake of the evening. And Senator Lodge, not then the Senator but who became the Senator that fall, came down the aisle and stopped at the table and gave his solicitations to Mr. Kennedy and Eunice that night before he left the hall. Shortly after that the Grand Knight had that picture made with Mrs. Colbert and the former President with the goat which we do have and which has been published in our papers.

Going back over the years after the congressional fight, six years passed and Mr. Kennedy decided he would run for the Senate. We opened a headquarters on Bunker Hill Street,

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Charlestown, at that time, and the late Paul Dever [Paul A. Dever] and the Kennedy factions worked together that year for the good of the Democratic Party united. That was the wishes of Jack's father that they should work together and go along for the good of the party in Charlestown. We did. We put our candidate across, and the girls who served with me in Charlestown previously went then to Boston to work. And I am sure that the lady present with me today will be able to tell about the Senateship office in town on Battery March Street. I visited Washington last week and went to the White House, but it was not the same to me as before. I am happy to have been able to give this part to the Memorial Library. Mary Colbert.

TIERNEY: Mrs. Colbert, I am sure there is much more you could tell us that you haven't told us about Jack Kennedy. How about the many nights that he spent in this den sitting on the hassock talking to you and your husband?

COLBERT: Well, I just can't recall a whole lot of the incidents that really took place. It is with sadness that I have really made this part of it, but I have been very happy.

And also there is another outstanding fact that proves that Jack never forgot. Along when President Truman [Harry S. Truman] and he made a trip to the Far West, on their return trip, he had three menus autographed of their breakfast with the insignia of the President on it. He wrote me a letter and he said, "Enclosed, Mary, are the mementos of the trip we took to Cleveland. I had one done for Ted Reardon's boy, Teddy [Timothy J. Reardon, Jr.], one for myself and I know you will cherish this one and always keep it." Which I have and still have it in my safe. I went to Washington with the Knights of Columbus. And as we stood on the lawn, I don't know of another minute of happiness that meant more to me than when he stepped across the line. There was no such thing as lines as far as Charlestown was concerned. And he said, "Mary, I am glad.... Mrs. Colbert, I am glad

to see you.” Then he spoke to each of the ones in turn. And on that night I flew back. I had come back to go to a wake here. Amongst the men that came in and talked to Mr. Colbert, they said, “How did she get back so quick?” “You should be proud of her.

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The President stepped forward today and put his hand out to shake hands and recognize her and tell the folks who had been associated with her.” We did have many people with us that day that perhaps were not a part of our organization.

Secondary, in 1960, January, I brought a young lady with me to Washington to the Conference of the Military Organizations. Through the efforts of Dave Powers an appointment was made that we had the opportunity of entering the personal side of the White House. And we sat to wait and Dave said, “Come to this room. We’re having a panel this morning and on it are Senators Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], Mansfield [Mike Mansfield] and your own John McCormack [John William McCormack].” And we went. We stood and saw and heard the whole of the conference. We came back into the room at Jack’s office and a door opened, and the girl who was with me even to this day says she shakes when she thinks of it. He came out and he said, “Mary, *am* I glad to see you!” And I presented this other girl to him. He asked us how the speeches had gone on at the conference that night, and he told us he was sorry that he wasn’t going to be able to attend it, but he was sending one of his emissaries, which he did. We sat and talked with him for about twenty minutes, and he gave us each a pen with his name and the White House on it. That to me, Dave Powers said, “Mary, you’ve had it. No matter where you go, how you go or when you go, there’s not many that can say the President came to you. That is it.”

TIERNEY: Mrs. Colbert, maybe you could tell us something about the different mementos you have on your fireplace here. Some of them are reminiscent of the President.

COLBERT: Well, on the fireplace there you will see several of the past presidents of the United States in plastic forms. We had several more, but like that, children who visited here picked up as souvenirs. You will notice on the back there several of those buffaloes, which are Mr. Colbert’s hobby. You’ll see Franklin Delano Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt]. You’ll see the pictures of the old Indian plantations. You will also see the chair with Jack sitting on it. The bust which I just brought back from Washington is in the other room, in the living room. The different flags, the flag of Texas, the American flag, and the Southern Confederate flag are also flags of Mr. Colbert.

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This here is known as.... You will notice it is the grave of one of the old, old Westerners and the dog sitting on it. That is one of Mr. Colbert’s prizes that he made himself. Above hang the pictures of my own son who was killed in 1940 on his return from Norwich University. Our only child. In the bookcases are Mr. Colbert’s hobbies, and on the wall you will see the picture of myself in uniform as the Treasurer of the Disabled American Veterans [D.A.V.] of



Massachusetts. I have just received from the National Headquarters of Disabled American Veterans the Gold Life Membership of the President's Mother as a Gold Star Mother and a life member of the Disabled American Veterans of America. On the side wall, you will see a steel engraving signed with Jack's autograph at the bottom. It hangs there. Amongst my own memories of last Friday which was my birthday and I celebrated my seventy-fourth birthday. You will see there the boy's trophies. He had many of the trophies at Norwich University.

TIERNEY: Mrs. Colbert, could you tell me when Jack Kennedy visited here, did he ever have any dinners here or did he ever have anything to eat while he was visiting?

COLBERT: No, he might have had a cold drink. That was all. But he did visit here with the boys of the Kennedy V.F.W. organization [Veterans of Foreign Wars]. In fact, the 17<sup>th</sup> of June that they marched in the parade, all of their clothes were left here while they marched. They came back here afterward. We did have his sister Eunice, visit here several times. On one occasion she came here to represent the Senator where he couldn't ride in the parade, and she came to take his place, and we took her to the headquarters and got her a place in the parade.

TIERNEY: Could you tell us some of the amusing things, the lighter things that may have happened during the campaign, other than the hard work that went into the campaign?

COLBERT: Well, we always had a lot of fun. That was one thing. And he always saw to it that Mr. Powers took care of the ladies, and that they had cars to be sure they got home right at night, and that there was a nice cold drink for them at the headquarters or ice cream or anything that might make the evening pleasant. I think that the setup that we had originally in '46 was one of the finest group of workers that I have ever worked with.

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TIERNEY: Could you tell us how you had worked in politics before? Was it through this D.A.V. group or was it through a political group that you became interested in politics?

COLBERT: No, No. I had been interested in all of those organizations before. In fact, I have been past president of the American Legion away back in Charlestown, and I went into the D.A.V. through my brother.

TIERNEY: Well, I know that Jack Kennedy considered you somewhat of a political expert in this area, and he certainly depended on you for a lot of the support that came from Charlestown. Tell me, did he think that he could go beyond Congress at the time that he ran in 1946? Did he feel as though he would go on beyond Congress? Did he indicate to you?

COLBERT: No, he just thought—well, he did say, of course, “You have your own candidates and so forth here. Well, what do you think?” And I said, “Well, the man who is opposing you in our district, we have had the opportunity of passing him over on several other occasions, and I am sure we’ll do it the third time for you.

TIERNEY: This man was who? Who was the man who was running against him?

COLBERT: There was Mike Neville [Michael J. Neville], John Cotter [John F. Cotter], I can’t recall the others, but there were three or four other candidates.

TIERNEY: Could you tell us how the Charlestown vote when that year?

COLBERT: Wholeheartedly. No antis. The Republicans went along. We don’t have many Republicans in Charlestown, very, very few.

TIERNEY: Could you tell me this: did you find it difficult to introduce somebody who was not a native of Charlestown to Charlestown? In other words, how did the people of Charlestown accept him at first? The fact that he was wealthy and...

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COLBERT: Well, he was around the district. People saw him. We had a tea at the Knights of Columbus where we filled the hall with women in and out through the afternoon and evening. His mother stood in line with him and Eunice, and they spoke to everyone as they came along. And he sold himself. I don’t believe anybody sold Jack.

TIERNEY: Except Jack Kennedy?

COLBERT: Jack himself.

TIERNEY: Were many of the veterans back at this point? Did you find that they rallied behind him?

COLBERT: Yes, all of them in Charlestown here. There was no question of anybody being—I couldn’t possibly say that I ever heard anybody speak against Jack. There was one former man that was in this district in political life, and he said, “Mary, I am sorry. I have to be against you this time. I owe my vote to Mike Neville. I have to be with Mike. I admire your organization and your setup and wish them the best of luck, but I do have to be with Mike Neville.

TIERNEY: Tell me this. I know he always enjoyed listening to stories of the, you know, the real hot political days in Charlestown. Could you tell me any story that you may have told him that he particularly enjoyed hearing over and over

again?

COLBERT: Well, there were so many you really couldn't pick one out, I would say, that would really mean too much because he was a sort of shy fellow. You know what I mean. He wasn't a seasoned politician by any means when he came to us. He was more on the boyish type and sort of, he pulled himself back, but he always had that little habit here of his hands in his coat. That was one of his characteristics that we noticed more than anything, and his way of presenting himself to the people. He sold himself.

TIERNEY: I see. They apparently went for that boyish charm, that shyness that was so characteristic.

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COLBERT: That's right.

TIERNEY: Well, I guess that winds up the interview, Mrs. Colbert. There isn't anything else you could possibly think of that you've forgotten?

COLBERT: No, I don't. To me today it's very hard to do this. It brings back so many fond memories.

TIERNEY: Well, that's very understandable. Thank you very much, Mrs. Colbert. Mrs. Colbert, did you ever think that Jack Kennedy would become president?

COLBERT: Oh, yes. I thought he would be president, but it would take a little time to get there. As we all know, when you go to the Congress first, or the Senate, either, you're supposed to be a very quiet member. But although Jack was shy in our days of going along with him in the setup of the organization, as he went along, he had what was needed to push himself forward there in the Senate. And there was no question in my mind when Jack got to the Senate but that he would be the President of the United States.

TIERNEY: And you were present in Washington to see him sworn in as President? You went to the Inaugural?

COLBERT: That's correct and we sat in front of the Hotel Willard with the girls. Present with me were two or three of the folks who started with me in '46 on Main Street, Charlestown. And we sat through the parade, the first section of it, to see the President pass, and it was so cold that after that, although we had seats in the main section of Pennsylvania Avenue, we had to go across the street. We were nearly frozen because the episode of what had happened the night before. We were on Capitol Hill that afternoon at various receptions of the Congressmen and the Senators, and when we came out around 4:30 or 5:00, a terrific snowstorm had started. We walked the length of Pennsylvania Avenue. It was impossible to get a cab, and what might have taken fifteen minutes to get to where we were, it took the girls—we had to go in relays—it took three hours. The snow

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fell so fast and so heavy; they didn't bring the Army out really until later in the evening to clear the way. It was really quite late in the early hours of the morning when we arrived back at our place in Virginia. But the next morning we did start out and were there bright and early to see him, and the evening of the ball we were at the Sheraton Park and had dinner with one of our own clergymen who was seated at Catholic University along with the Grand Knight of the Knights of Columbus, Edward Callaghan.

TIERNEY: Did you get to the swearing-in ceremony, at all?

COLBERT: Yes.

TIERNEY: And did you see him the night of the ball at all? I know he did go around to some of the hotels. Did he get to the Sheraton Park?

COLBERT: He went to the Sheraton Park and he went to two other hotels, but we were at the Sheraton Park. That was where we were located that night. And it brought back a lot of those memories when we were there last week at the Sheraton Park. In fact, we saw the little place we stayed where we had dinner that night of the Inauguration.

TIERNEY: Was this the first Inaugural you had been to ever?

COLBERT: Oh, no, oh, no. I went to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's inaugurations, three of them. I went to Eisenhower's [Dwight D. Eisenhower].

TIERNEY: Did you?

COLBERT: That's right.

TIERNEY: But this had a real special meaning for you.

COLBERT: Well, he was one of our own products.

TIERNEY: Tell me, where were you on November 22 when the news of his death came?

COLBERT: Right here. On those three days during that ceremony

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about ten times I got ready to go and Mr. Colbert said, "You better stay right here." I don't think anything has ever affected me in my life outside of my son's death as that.

TIERNEY: So you didn't actually go to the funeral?

COLBERT: No, I sat right here. But I did, when I went to Washington this year in January, I did go over to the grave on three occasions. We went out with a group, and then we went out twice ourselves. And then last week we also went, and Massachusetts women placed a large white wreath for the whole of the women of Massachusetts at the grave. The governor's wife [Barbara Peabody] was present and did it along with Mary Fantasia.

TIERNEY: This concludes an interview with Mrs. Mary Colbert of High Street, Charlestown, on May 5, 1964. The interviewer was Mary Tierney of the *Boston Traveler*.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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