

Lawrence J. Arata Oral History Interview – 1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Arata, White House upholsterer from 1961 to 1977, discusses how he became White House upholsterer, his work at the White House, and his memories of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, among other issues.

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Lawrence J. Arata

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Oral History Interview

With

LAWRENCE J. ARATA

1964

Washington, D.C.

By Pamela Turnure

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TURNURE: We will now hear from Larry Arata who is the White House upholsterer. Mr. Arata, do you by any chance remember how you first met the Kennedy family?

ARATA: Yes, I do, very well. A friend of mine who was in charge of transportation asked me if I'd like to drive my car the day the President [John F. Kennedy] was to make his acceptance speech in Hyannis. So I thought it was a wonderful opportunity. I drove the Shrivvers and the Lawfords in my pink Cadillac right behind the President and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] all the way to Hyannis. Then about 6 months later, I got a call from the White House to come to do all the upholstery work.

TURNURE: Was that on a permanent basis when you got there?

ARATA: No, for 6 weeks they said. They thought there was that much work but there was much more to be done and I am starting my 3rd year now (1964).

TURNURE: Tell me, where did you live when you came to Washington so suddenly?

ARATA: Well, when I came to the White House, they gave me a beautiful room on the 3rd floor. And I had my meals in the White House also, which I thought was wonderful.

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TURNURE: You're not a city man, are you?

ARATA: No, no, no, I come from quiet Cape Cod. During the first year I lived in the White House I took music lessons every Monday night from one of the White House police officers, as one of my hobbies is music. One day I was asked by one of the White House school teachers to play for Caroline [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy] and her schoolmates on the 3rd floor, about 20 children were present.

TURNURE: What instrument did you play?

ARATA: The piano-accordion which I love. I guess that's the Italian in me. And the children seemed to enjoy it very much.

TURNURE: What fun. How much did you see of the Kennedy children?

ARATA: I saw them quite often--practically every day. Caroline was always asking questions: "Who are you? What do you do?"

TURNURE: Did she ask you to tell stories?

ARATA: No.

TURNURE: But she was very curious about who you were and what you were doing?

ARATA: Yes, very much.

TURNURE: What about John [John F. Kennedy, Jr.]? Do you remember any definite impressions of him?

ARATA: Not too much about Johnny as he was quite young.

TURNURE: How often did you run into the President? Do you happen to remember that?

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ARATA: I passed him many times in the hallway and would just greet the

President as I knew he was very busy. I had much more to do with Mrs. Kennedy regarding materials for the furniture.

TURNURE: You worked for her on the Fine Arts Committee is that right?

ARATA: Yes, I did.

TURNURE: Well, what were her tastes like? Did she seem to know exactly what she wanted?

ARATA: Exquisite taste. She seemed to know a lot about everything whether it was materials, paintings, or anything pertaining to art. She was just wonderful.

TURNURE: And you thought she was an intelligent woman?

ARATA: Oh, yes, extremely intelligent.

TURNURE: How was it decided that you would stay for more than 6 weeks?

ARATA: There was much more work than they thought. They decided to do over the Blue Room, the Green Room and the Red Room and then their own personal quarters, which I did.

TURNURE: So you realized then that it was a full time job and would last as long as they were in the White House ?

ARATA: Oh, yes, That's right.

TURNURE: Incidentally, I forgot to ask you, how did Mrs. Kennedy heard about you as an upholsterer? Through a friend?

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ARATA: Through, Mrs. Paul Mellon [Rachel Lambert Lloyd Mellon], who had come to Cape Cod every summer. For years I did her work and when Mrs. Kennedy started the restoration program at the White House, Mrs. Mellon spoke to Mrs. Kennedy and that's how I went to the White House. I have both of them to thank for the biggest break of my life as I consider it an honor to have been chosen to do all the upholstery work for the First Family as well as all the famous and well publicized Kennedy Rockers.

TURNURE: You've enjoyed your work there?

ARATA: Very much. I met a lot of very interesting people.

TURNURE: Well, didn't you meet one person in particular at the White House?

ARATA: Yes, I met my wife, Norma Zandrino, an Italian girl from Massachusetts. I happen to be Italian also, that is, both of our backgrounds are Italian, but both of us were born in Massachusetts. We got married on my birthday, February 20, 1963 and we now have our own little white house in Falls Church, Virginia--a brick Rambler with white trimmings.

TURNURE: Oh, you do? Who was she working for at the White House?

ARATA: She's been a secretary on Mr. O'Brien's [Lawrence F. O'Brien] staff and has been a secretary at the White House for 12 years.

TURNURE: Did you have a wedding?

ARATA: We were married on a Wednesday and back to work on a Thursday morning.

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TURNURE: Did Mrs. Kennedy know about the wedding?

ARATA: She did, and she felt very sorry that we couldn't have more time off.

TURNURE: Could you tell me, Mr. Arata, where you were at the time when the President was assassinated and how you heard the news?

ARATA: Yes, I was on the ground floor in what they call the Map Room and there was a secret service man there sitting at the desk and he happened to get a phone call. He said to me, "the President has just been shot." Well, I thought maybe the President was just wounded a little bit. And he ran down the hall; he was very excited. There were 3 or 4 other secret service men running down the hall. I couldn't work the rest of the afternoon as it was such a shock!

TURNURE: So you really heard it from the secret service man?

ARATA: Yes. That was the first I knew of it.

TURNURE: And then what did you do? Go home later?

ARATA: I went home later that night and about 9 o'clock that evening, I got a phone call to go back to the White House. I was asked if I had any black material to decorate the windows, mantels and chandeliers.

TURNURE: Do you remember the details?

ARATA: My wife and I worked with Mr. Shriver [Robert Sargent Shriver, Jr.] as to what had to be draped in black. My wife and I hung and draped the black material until 4:30 in the morning just as Mrs. Kennedy accompanied the body to the White House.

[-5-]

TURNURE: A lot of people have asked me the question, as to where you got the black crepe. Do you have the answer?

ARATA: I had a big roll of black cambric which I always put on the bottom of a chair to finish it off. A lot of people thought it was silk material, but it was, plain, black cambric. Mrs. Kennedy wanted it very, very humble, the same as Lincoln's [Abraham Lincoln] funeral. Nothing fancy. And I pinned the cambric on the draperies and tried to drape the material to give it a custom appearance.

TURNURE: And you had enough material?

ARATA: It so happened I had ordered a new role of 100 yards a few days previous to the assassination.

TURNURE: It was quite a job. And the day of the funeral, were you also at the White House?

ARATA: Yes, and my wife and I had tickets for the church services.

TURNURE: Is there anything in particular you would like to say about your impressions about the First Family? Were they kind to you and you felt very affectionately towards them?

ARATA: I certainly did. I never met such wonderful people. I also helped Mrs. Kennedy in her Georgetown home after she left the White House.

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[END OF INTERVIEW]

Lawrence J. Arata Oral History Transcript
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