

Alfred Chester Hanford Oral History Statement – JFK#1, circa 1966
Administrative Information

Creator: Alfred Chester Hanford

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Biographical Note

Hanford, Professor of government, Harvard University (1923 - 1975), discusses his time teaching JFK at Harvard and his impressions of JFK as a young student, among other issues.

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Oral History Statement

Of

Alfred Chester Hanford

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Oral History Statement

with

Alfred Chester Hanford

For the John F. Kennedy Library

In the fall of 1935 I first became aware of the presence of John F. Kennedy as an undergraduate since I had approved his entrance the preceding spring at which time I was Dean of Harvard College and thus an ex officio member of the Committee on Admissions. Later I knew that he was on the swimming and football squads, was on the staff of the *Crimson*, and a resident of Winthrop House in which my son of the class of 1941 also lived. Incidentally, a Student Council Committee under the chairmanship of John Kennedy's brother, Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., recommended in 1937-38 that swimming be made a major sport, which recommendation was carried out by the Athletic Committee in that same year.

While therefore I knew that John Kennedy was a member of the undergraduate body, it was not until the fall of 1938 that I became acquainted with him personally. At that time he enrolled in Government 9a, a course in American State Government, conducted by me in Sever 23. The course at that time emphasized such subjects as state constitutional development, the position of the governor, the legislature, the state judiciary, problems of administrative organization, federal-state relations, plus a little about state politics.

As I look back over the years, Gov. 9a was not a very good course because my duties as Dean kept me so busy that there was little time for research or the proper organization of material on state and local government which has always been in a state of change. It was hard enough to find time to grade the examination papers in November and at the end of the half year; but that was a task I felt I should do myself rather than leave to an assistant. By so doing, it was possible to become acquainted with the capabilities of the students enrolled in the course. Needless to say, there was not time for the assignment and reading of term papers but there was the reading period which made possible the assignment of four or five optional books which gave the students a chance to do some independent work and to report on what they had done in an hour-long essay in the final examination. It was John Kennedy's ability to answer his examination questions with clarity and style, combined with his skill in organizing his subject matter, that made me wonder if he might

not become a newspaperman. I also thought that he might make a good lawyer because of the type of questions in classroom discussion which interested him and the ease with which he made his comments thereon. As a matter of fact, the 1940 Class Album discloses that Jack put down "law" as his intended profession.

As a result of the several shortcomings and merits of the course, there was time for classroom discussion each week which took a little of the pressure off the lecturer. Also the course was small enough that it was possible for me to become fairly well acquainted with the students as individuals.

I remember John Kennedy sat near the center of Sever 23 next to his roommate Torbert McDonald, now a member of Congress from Massachusetts. At that time Kennedy was a rather thin, somewhat reserved but pleasant young man with an open countenance which often wore an inquisitive look. He was regular in attendance and took an active part in classroom discussion in which he made pertinent remarks. However, and much to my surprise, the grandson of "Honey Fitz" showed little absorption in state politics which were given some attention in the course. John Kennedy was more interested in the changing position of the American state, in federal-state relations and state constitutional development. As mentioned above, I was particularly impressed with his examination papers, especially with the long essays on the optional reading, since they were well organized and gave evidence of independent thinking, although I must admit the handwriting was at times difficult to decipher. He received a B in the course. He also achieved honor grades in his other five courses in history, government, economics and English composition—no mean accomplishment for a student carrying 6 courses. Jack's record during this term not only demonstrated his innate intellectual capacity, but gave promise of his understanding of challenging situations in his future career and his determination to meet them. All in all John Kennedy in 1938-39 was a most satisfactory student and my life as Dean would have been much easier if there had been more of his kind.

As I look back on that first half of John Kennedy's junior year (1938-1939), I can see that his mind was on somewhat broader subjects than state government. This was made more clear when one day he talked to me after class about the possibility of taking a leave of absence during the second half of the academic year to be with his father who was then Ambassador to Great Britain and to visit various places in continental Europe. I told him that I regarded this as an unusual opportunity. However, I explained that the routine was to make application to his class Dean, Stephen Stackpole, and that I would recommend to the Administrative Board that his request be granted. The Board voted on February 7, 1939, "to grant the Petition of John F. Kennedy '40, in order to go to London."

Later I discovered that John had for some time been making plans to interrupt his studies at Harvard College in order to spend a half year abroad because his "day page" for the year 1937-38 includes a note indicating that he had talked with one of the secretaries in the office as early as April 1938 about his desire to take 6 courses in the fall term of 1938-39 in order to go to London.

The leave of absence which John Kennedy obtained in 1938-39 was one of the factors which led to an increased interest in foreign affairs. During this half year abroad he visited London, Paris, Poland, Russia, Turkey, the Balkans and Berlin. He returned to Harvard College with an even greater concern for intellectual achievement. His observations of happenings in Europe and the material gathered there also provided the spark for his honors thesis in government on *Appeasement at Munich* which was later revised and published in July of 1940 under the title *Why England Slept*. Although the thesis was not in my field, I recall that John Kennedy consulted me on one or two occasions about some general problems connected with his dissertation.

The next personal contact with John Kennedy which indirectly had some relation to his undergraduate days occurred in the fall of 1958 when he was campaigning for reelection to the United States Senate. At that time I had just retired and was living in Ware, Massachusetts, a prosperous mill town of 7500 inhabitants, located in central Massachusetts. One morning, Mr. Peter Rzeznikiewicz, a friend and neighbor, who was chairman of the Town Democratic Committee, asked me if I would introduce Senator Kennedy to the people of the area when he spoke from the steps of the Town Hall. "But I am a Republican," I told Pete. His reply was that this made no difference. He wanted me to present the Senator because I had known him personally, had enjoyed the privilege of teaching him and had supported him politically. So I was glad to carry out the task.

At the beginning of my brief remarks, as I recall, I said that Senator Kennedy needed no introduction to the people of Ware; he had the welfare of the citizens at heart; was much concerned with the industrial well-being of the community; and that his record spoke for itself. However, I did want to add that his abilities and character were known to me personally because ten years previously he had been a student in a course which I gave in state government. With John Kennedy's usual keen wit, he said that he was glad to see me again and commented that he had found the problems of state and local government so complicated that he had decided to turn his attention to national and foreign affairs! (The two pictures which accompany these memories include a "terrible" picture of myself with Senator Kennedy wearing the old quizzical look he showed in the classroom as if he did not know just what I was going to say. In this picture his wife looks even more perplexed. The other picture shows the Senator in a more relaxed mood as Carol Rzeznikiewicz, the daughter of the Chairman of the Democratic Town Committee, Town Clerk and Treasurer, and my wife's niece presented Mrs. Kennedy with a bouquet of roses. (The head at the lower right hand corner is that of Mr. Rzeznikiewicz making certain that the ceremony was moving along smoothly.)

The letter from the White House dated January 28, 1961, also has an indirect relationship with President Kennedy's undergraduate days. It was in reply to a letter of congratulations in which I underlined the statement that he had enough to do and that I did not desire a reply. Hence President Kennedy's rejoinder that "This is perhaps the first time that I have ever repudiated the stern injunction of an academic dean."

The reference to the “bench” in the second paragraph has to do with one of the original benches from Sever 23 where Government 9 met. This I had acquired along with four chairs at the time the old furniture was replaced. In my letter I had referred to the bench with its carvings of names, initials, football scores, subways and holes cut clear through the thick wood, and had told the President that my wife’s nieces and nephews had come around to show their young friends what they had called the “holy relic” because it had come from the classroom where President Kennedy had sat. I cannot swear that it actually was the bench where the future president sat regularly, but it did come from the center of the room where John Kennedy and his roommate, Torbert McDonald (now Congressman) did sit. I used a seating arrangement for only a few weeks at the beginning of the term until I had become acquainted with the names and faces of the students, so I am practically certain that my most famous student at some time during the half year had sat at this particular bench.

(Photograph of the bench and its carvings are attached hereto.)

[END OF STATEMENT]

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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

January 28, 1961

Dear Mr. Hanford:

This is perhaps the first time that I have ever repudiated the stern injunction of an academic dean, but I cannot resist thanking you most genuinely for your very kind letter which awaited me when I arrived at the White House.

I am delighted that the new Administration brings you so much pleasure and that so many of your former students and colleagues are associated with me. I hope that Harvard can soon adapt herself to the deprivations which the change of administration has caused in Cambridge. I well remember our class meetings in Sever Hall, and I am quite confident that the bench you have bears some of my scars.

I hope that your conversion to the national democratic party has not been too painful and that my future record will sustain your confidence.

With all best personal wishes to you and your wife,

Sincerely,

Mr. A. Chester Hanford
5 Greenway Avenue
Ware, Massachusetts

*Mr. Hanford -
It was a pleasure to
see you when I was
at Cambridge in 1958*