

Thomas M.C. Johnston Oral History Interview – RFK#4, 02/09/1970
Administrative Information

Creator: Thomas M.C. Johnston
Interviewer: Larry J. Hackman
Date of Interview: February 9, 1970
Place of Interview: New York, New York
Length: 8 pages

Biographical Note

Thomas M. C. Johnston was Executive Assistant for Senator Robert F. Kennedy, New York City (1966 - 1968), and Robert F. Kennedy's representative for the Bedford-Stuyvesant Corporation. This interview focuses on Earl Graves' involvement in Bedford-Stuyvesant, reflections on time spent as part of Bedford-Stuyvesant, and reflections of Robert F. Kennedy, among other things.

Access

Open

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed May 31, 1973, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

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 The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form.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

Thomas M.C. Johnston, recorded interview by Larry J. Hackman, February 9, 1970, (page number), Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library.

File

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

of Thomas M. C. Johnston

to the

JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

I, Thomas M. C. Johnston, of New York, New York, do hereby give to the John F. Kennedy Library, for use and administration therein, all my rights, title and interest, except as hereinafter provided, to the tape recording and transcript of the interview conducted at Cambridge, Massachusetts, and New York, New York, on May 6, 1969, October 27, 1969, January 21, 1970, and February 9, 1970 for the John F. Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. The interview is to be closed to general research for a period of 20 years.
2. During the term of these restrictions researchers may apply to me for written permission for access to the interview, and those receiving my written permission are to be granted access to the interview by the Director of the John F. Kennedy Library.
3. Researchers who have access to the transcript of the interview may listen to the tape; however, this is to be for background use only. Researchers may not cite, paraphrase or quote from the tape.
4. I retain literary property rights to the interview for a period of 20 years, or until my death, whichever is the later, at which time the literary property rights shall be assigned to the United States Government.
5. This agreement may be revised or amended by mutual consent of the parties undersigned.

Thomas M.C. Johnston

 Thomas M. C. Johnston

May 20, 1973

 Date

James B. Rhoads

 Archivist of the United States

May 31, 1973

 Date

Thomas M.C. Johnston – RFK #4
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Memories of Earl Graves' involvement in Bedford - Stuyvesant
2	Challenges during Bedford – Stuyvesant
3	Reflections on time spent as part of Bedford – Stuyvesant
4	Political people's opinions of Bedford – Stuyvesant and relationships with Robert F. Kennedy [RFK]
6	Reflections of RFK

Fourth Oral History Interview

with

THOMAS M. C. JOHNSTON

February 9, 1970
New York, New York

By Larry J. Hackman

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

HACKMAN: Okay, let me just to start off with, because we're inter-
viewing Earl Graves coming up: what can you remember about
him on Bedford-Stuyvesant? What did he do, particularly
after he came on the staff?

JOHNSTON: Well, initially, before he came on the staff, he had been
helpful in talking to people out there; had gotten us in
touch with a number of people; and also, had just been
helpful. And, then I forget the exact date he came on the staff, but
he continued to work on it. He was involved in it maybe less as time
went on because . . . [Interruption] He was less involved than one
might have expected, as time went on, because of sort of local feelings
out there. I think it was just probably a natural thing which he didn't
have much to do about, but it made it hard for him to act both as . . .
It was kind of what you'd almost have to call a conflict between his
role as resident and citizen of Bedford-Stuyvesant, on the one hand,
and as representative of Senator Kennedy. And, with all the competitive-
ness out there I think it was difficult for him to operate, say, as
effectively as if he'd been working up in Harlem or in, for that
matter, Westchester County--and he worked in quite a few areas.

HACKMAN: In the earlier period, then, were his ties to basically
the right kinds of people out there?

JOHNSTON: Yes. Yeah, he was in the sense that . . . Yeah, I'd
say his instincts were good--his sense of who was effective.
It wasn't that. . . . He didn't have so much allegiances
or commitments to anybody, as much as--and we didn't expect him to

have that, and he didn't pretend to or desire to. I think his helpfulness was really in terms of information about people, judgment about their abilities, their relationships with one another and so on. He was extraordinarily helpful on that.

HACKMAN: Okay. We went through the reconstituting of the board and everything out there. The only other thing I can think of is, if you can recall other things, after that all started going, that you remained involved in over time?

JOHNSTON: Well, then I was very involved in sort of helping with Frank [Franklin A. Thomas] and helping on the D&S [Distribution & Services Corporation] side, both to recruit people for D&S and to help develop programs and to get the funding, say, for the Superblock. I really spent an awful lot. . . . Senator Kennedy had me spend a great amount of time at the outset, because we didn't have a staff and we had taken on a lot of responsibilities. It was a difficult period because it was not clear. We didn't want to be running it, vis-a-vis Frank, and yet, we had to make some effort to help him out.

That part worked out very well, actually, because he took hold and there wasn't any problem. I think our problem came more in the area of making a contribution, and yet not too much of a contribution, vis-a-vis the director of D&S, who is Eli Jacobs and then who later became John Doar. In both cases, I think there was somewhat of a problem at different points . . . [Interruption]

HACKMAN: You were saying there was a slight problem with the Eli Jacobs-John Doar thing.

JOHNSTON: Well, I think what you had there was a situation just completely predictable, where we were the ones who generated these two corporations. In the case of Frank, you had a guy who came on early, full-time, very competent and took hold. In the case of Eli, you had a very able and good fellow who was on a temporary basis until we found another man; and who is operating, by definition, in a subsidiary, secondary support role to Frank--which is enough of a complication in itself. John came on after a period of time, when the thing had been going, and immediately, soon thereafter got involved in the school board thing. So--but of course that was after Senator Kennedy's death, so that really isn't relevant to this.

There's been a kind of a problem in the sense that our office had to steer a course between being too sort of active and taking too much responsibility and, at the same time, we had to be careful not to shirk the responsibility that Senator Kennedy's commitment to this thing represented. So, in some cases, I think we erred sometimes in getting too involved and doing too much, other times in not paying enough attention to some area or other and letting it kind of fall to bits.

I think that probably I was. . . . You know, in many cases, those were things which I. . . . [Interruption] When you look at the whole thing, that was a problem. I am not at all sure that somebody couldn't have handled it better, but it was a problem that was kind of built into the way in which these things got started and the way in which we were related to them, because it was clear that what we wanted to do, when you boil it right down, was have. . . . If the thing was going to work, we wanted it to be a success that was shared with a lot of other people, including the staffs of both those groups, the boards, and so on. On the other hand, though, it was also clear that if it was a failure it was going to be Robert Kennedy's failure. So, every time it got looking like it might be a failure, we'd have to be there; and that, even in terms of some very small things, sometimes created problems. It meant that we spent, as a staff, a lot of time on it.

HACKMAN: Okay. If there are other things on Bedford-Stuyvesant, you can probably stick them in as you read it over, or even put them in with the one you have.

JOHNSTON: I'd say on the whole, what was interesting about it was that all the political people. . . . I may have said this before, but I think it is important point in summary: Bedford-Stuyvesant both looks very simple and very complicated. In an interesting way it was both, because, on the one hand it was something that Senator Kennedy saw was needed. By using his resources, his staff, his own experience and so on, his popularity, support that he had with black people--all of that made it relatively easy to do compared to, say, just anybody getting out and trying to do it.

On the other hand, though, it was terribly complicated, because for the same reasons that he had power and authority and so on, he also had enemies. He had, say, in the public. . . . Governor [Nelson A.] Rockefeller was not for this; he tried to stop it. David Rockefeller was the only person that turned us down about going on the board. There was an effort. . . . And there was a great deal of suspicion on the part of [John V.] Lindsay and even, in a way, on the part of [Jacob K.] Javits, although once Javits got on it, he got very committed to it. Out in the community, because he was so well-known, there was a great deal of attention drawn to the fact of what he was doing. It was harder to keep it quiet and go through the initial development phases we'd hoped to do quietly and without a lot of controversy.

I don't think quite all of the things that stormed around Judge [Thomas R.] Jones's head would have happened with the same ferocity had there been somebody less well-known, who attracted less attention and held out less hope, really. I think we would have had certainly a lot less trouble in some ways with the [Lyndon B.] Johnson administration; although, funny enough, there was not a substantial amount of trouble with them because they just didn't pay much attention to it.

On the other hand, there was incredible support. So, what's clear is, you have some terrific pluses by having Senator Kennedy do this. He did, on the other hand, I also think, he brought with him some problems, which you couldn't separate out.

On balance, though, what's clear and what's really relevant to other experiences like this is that what made it work--and I think it's late enough now, it's at a point now where you can say it has worked in at least its first phase. Whether it's really successful is something that in five to ten years from now we'll know. But in terms of this actual getting it all put together, what really made the difference was a man who was able to mobilize lots of good people--people that he wasn't afraid to have see him under pressure and wasn't necessarily political supporters of his--put them together, get an effective working unit out of all of that, and then forge on at great political risk to himself.

In all of this, smart political people in New York City looking at this said he was crazy to get into it because he was really moving into an area which was Lindsay's--which was Lindsay's problem--and where his failures would be a lot more visible, demonstrable, than if he were just making speeches on the Senate floor.

HACKMAN: Yeah. Who were any of these people?

JOHNSTON: Well, Paul Bragdon was one, for instance, who's a very bright, able guy. I think Debs Myers probably felt the same way. A number of people, just looking at it coldly, politically, would make the judgment that this didn't make too much sense over the short term. Now, they could see the longer-run ramifications, but from Robert Kennedy's point of view--who was already sympathetic, well, was already considered to be a friend to the blacks and the disadvantaged--one more effort like this didn't really gain him that much with them; it hurt him maybe with people that thought that he'd already had too much of an emphasis on that; and basically, but even more important, it laid him open to a real fiasco in terms of operations breaking down, nothing happening, groups squabbling.

So the very fact that it got going at all, in a sense, was a success in those terms, because it avoided a disaster. Then, the fact that he got good quality people like Thomas, Doar, and others out there, and got these board members like [Benno] Schmidt and all of them--[Andre] Meyer, [Roswell L.] Gilpatric--to really spend time on it, was a sort of positive result of a rather bold--extremely bold--move, when you consider what he was risking with it.

HACKMAN: You mentioned Lindsay a little bit on Bedford-Stuyvesant. I think you said last time that there were some other things on Lindsay you can remember.

JOHNSTON: Well, Lindsay. The relationship between Robert Kennedy and John Lindsay was interesting because it was never an easy one; I think that's probably the best way to put it. You don't want to overstate the differences and overstate the sort of conflicts because I think it's easy to do that, and that's a mistake. I think probably the fact is, though, that going back to the time when Robert Kennedy was attorney general, Lindsay made some critical remarks in the House [of Representatives] about Robert Kennedy which probably went back to an earlier social difference. It started in a rather small way in Washington, grew up to become kind of a competitive and just a temperamental difference between the two.

HACKMAN: Did he say this? I mean, did he ever talk about this? This is how it started? Something. . . .

JOHNSTON: Well, no. I'd heard that; he never said that. I'd heard that it just came about when Lindsay made a toast at a party and Robert Kennedy stood up--in the sixties this was, and the toast was rather long and pompous--and made a toast which was light and rather obviously a parody of the prior toast. But that's somebody's story, and that might or might not have happened. Even if it happened, it might have been something that Lindsay forgot about the next day and wasn't anything.

In any case, there was a history when Robert Kennedy got to be senator and Lindsay became mayor. There's been a history of sort of differences, and everybody was always, of course, writing about them as competitors for the presidency and so on; so, they were competing with each other, in a sense, here. I'd say it made for it and a lot of other elements, just in terms of the political facts up here; Lindsay's future, Kennedy's future, Kennedy's future, and all of that made it a complicated kind of relationship.

They didn't really work together that much on that many things. They worked on the Police-Civilian Review Board, which Lindsay proposed and which was defeated. Kennedy and Javits helped campaign for that. They worked on the Bedford-Stuyvesant thing together. They had some joint press conferences on different subjects where they were both involved.

Generally, there was a sort of tightness and a kind of a stiffness about them when they were together. Robert Kennedy is the much more relaxed of the two. It seemed to make Lindsay. . . . But I wouldn't say he made any great effort to put Lindsay at ease or to reach out and be particularly warm about anything. He wasn't rude, and neither was Lindsay, but Lindsay then would get rather stiff and. . . . So, I'd say it was about what you'd expect, knowing them both and knowing their situations.

On the other hand, on things really when they counted, in many cases Lindsay was terribly helpful. The problem, of course, wasn't

really that he didn't want to be helpful. It was, in the case of things like Bedford-Stuyvesant, he didn't have much more power than Kennedy did, in many instances, to move a city agency. Obviously, he was closer to the problem, and he had a sort of Theoretically he could do more, but, in fact, he often was just about as far from the capacity to get the job done as the senator would be. So, I think that, to the extent that we got limited help, which we really have to date from the city, it's more a function of just the bureaucracy and the problems that Lindsay, or any man, would encounter in running a city.

HACKMAN: Okay. A couple of the other things. You were going to talk about Tom Hayden, Robert Lowell. Anything stand out there?

JOHNSTON: Yeah. I think that was particularly interesting about Robert Kennedy and was the great joy of working with him; for me, I mean. Really, I'd say one of the great dividends, among many, of working for him was the fact that he really was very curious about people and profoundly interested not so much in their substantive point of view as the way they looked at things, their quality as people, their character. And he was interested enough in that to take advantage of opportunities that he had, being senator, to meet people like Hayden, like Staughton Lynd, like Jimmy Breslin, like Robert Lowell, [Yevgeny] Yevtushenko, [Andrei] Vozneshensky, quite a few people--they're really up in the dozens and dozens of people like that--who for one reason or another wanted to see him.

Now, many times he'd be very perfunctory. The interesting thing about him was that he varied quite a bit. Sometimes you'd have a meeting and he just wouldn't make any effort at all; he'd just sit there and really wouldn't give at all to this. Generally, that was when it would be some foreign minister or the consul from some country coming to present their credentials. They had a lot of those kind of meetings, and those were pretty brief and rather--they were never chilly; they were warm, in a way--minimal. So, I don't mean, really, those, of which there were lots and lots.

Really, I think what was most interesting for him and for me--for him, principally, and, then, I think, for the people themselves-- was he'd have a drink in the late afternoon, say with Lowell; they would just talk for a couple of hours--with Hayden and Lynd another time, with a number of these people, and Vozneshensky--or sometimes it'd be in the morning. But he'd spend an hour, an hour and a half, and just talk about anything, totally unrelated to politics. In the case of Lowell, it was about the Old Testament most of the time. Lowell was telling stories about it, and he was talking about it.

I think that was a great source of He had a real kind of a need, almost, to have those kinds of conversations and do that kind of reading as well.

HACKMAN: Would he open up, or would he mostly ask questions?

7.

JOHNSTON: No, he'd do both. He'd speak as much as the other fellow, depending on. . . . But I think his effort was not--and that was both a great source of his charm and, also, I think, a great relief for people--to impress people that he knew. He, very often, you know, was able to finish a couplet that Richard Burton couldn't remember. I mean, it wasn't as if he couldn't contribute--and he did, very much, do that. But, I think you'd have to say, generally, he assumed that whatever subject they were talking about, whoever it was knew more about it than he did. But it wasn't just a sort of interrogation, either.

HACKMAN: Would he ever say, for instance, "Well, gee, I don't know anything about this at all?"

JOHNSTON: Well, I don't think he'd ever pretend that he did if he didn't. In many cases he didn't but he wouldn't say it in that way. I mean, it wasn't his way of saying it; it wasn't his approach to it.

HACKMAN: Would he ever try to change subjects with people like that?

JOHNSTON: Change subjects?

HACKMAN: Yeah. Can you remember things that bored him, that turned him off, and so, he just wanted to change the subject with people like that?

JOHNSTON: Oh, I see what you mean. No, not with people like that, no. I mean, he did that with people that he. . . . I think you just have to make the distinction between people that he sort of had to see and then the people that he really had chosen. What I'm talking about are people who it was a deep kind of pleasure and a great opportunity for him to see.

I think what's important is that he. . . . You see, what's awfully hard and what's rather rare, I think, among people who are so busy and have all of those kind of responsibilities, problems, and, also, rather easy joys of going to meetings and being applauded, is the capacity that he had to stop and really just sink into something, really absorb the presence and the experience of somebody else--in a gratuitous way, in a way that didn't lead him any further down the path to some political goal. I mean, he was not single-minded in that way, at all.

That's what's, I think, often hard to get if you're just reading books about him. You can understand that yes, he had many advisers, that he sought out many points of view, that he traveled to many places and did many different kinds of things, but you still tend, I think, to believe that all this was subordinated to a kind of monolithic will. Most often, implicit in that is almost some kind of coherent program that he had in mind, all of which related to his own political sort of advancement.

I think that is really far from the truth, and it's a very hard thing to convey the other because you will say, "Well, he read, you know, lots of books." Well, people will say, "Yeah? What kind of books?" You say, "Well, he was interested in Greek tragedy, and he reads historical novels; he reads quite a lot of poetry; he reads Shakespeare; he reads some topical, current books, but not so many older novels."

Well, you tell somebody that, and they say, "That's fine. That's the kind of veneer that you'd expect a politician and a Kennedy to have. His brother did that; he'd have to do that. It doesn't mean he has any interest, or that he really, in a sense, values that as anything but a kind of form of camouflage, like you'd wear a tie to dinner. It's a sort of cultural little thing that you hang on and has no real. . . . It doesn't tell you much more about him than we already knew." That's, I think, the normal response somebody would give to that.

I think what's revealing about these kinds of conversations is that he really was much more interested, genuinely, in the substance of it, and just in his ability, really, to sort of get outside of his own situation, to get outside of being senator, brother of the late president, and possible future president, and to just confront those things in the way one would as a student or just as a citizen, as a human being.

~~Y~~ou know, another instance of that is whenever we went on these trips. Whenever there was a time when we had some free time, whether it was, say, like in Athens, at the end of the Africa trip. . . . He said, "Could we find some professors who could take us to the Parthenon and some of the other ruins?" [Interruption]