

James R. Ketchum Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 03/18/1965
Administrative Information

Creator: James R. Ketchum
Interviewer: Pamela Turnure
Date of Interview: March 18, 1965
Place of Interview: Washington, D.C.
Length: 36 pages

Biographical Note

James R. Ketchum (1939 - 2024). Historian, U. S. Department of the Interior (1960 - 1962); Registrar, White House (1962 - 1963); Curator, White House (1963 - 1970); Curator, U. S. Senate (1970 - 1995); Curator Emeritus (1995 - 2024) In this interview Ketchum focuses on the White House restoration, establishment of the Fine Arts Committee and the White House Historical Association, Jacqueline Kennedy's involvement, Ketchum's interactions with the Kennedy children, and the preparation of the White House for President Kennedy's funeral, among other topics.

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Suggested Citation

James Ketchum, recorded interview by Pamela Turnure, March 18, 1965, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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James R. Ketchum – JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

JAMES R. KETCHUM

March 18, 1965
Washington, D.C.

By Pamela Turnure

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TURNURE: This is an interview with James Ketchum, Curator of the White House. How long have you been in your present position, Mr. Ketchum?

KETCHUM: Since October of 1963.

TURNURE: In what capacity was that?

KETCHUM: I joined first of all to set up the filing of the inventory system for the White House. Shortly thereafter, the beginning of the following summer, 1962, I took on the duties of Registrar.

TURNURE: How long has there been a Fine Arts Committee?

KETCHUM: The idea of a Fine Arts Committee was forthcoming back in February and March of 1961, and it was formally set up in April of 1961.

TURNURE: So when you joined the White House Curatorial Staff, the program was well under way.

KETCHUM: Exactly. They had started working on the basic

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plans as far as what rooms were to be covered. Just subsequent to my joining the staff, it had set up a special Paintings Committee, which would be doing the same thing that the Fine Arts Committee proper was doing in the field of furnishings for the executive mansion.

TURNURE: The Fine Arts Committee was started by Mrs. Kennedy? It was her idea?

KETCHUM: That's right, back in the very early days of the Administration.

TURNURE: When you came to the White House, what rooms had then been completed, or in which was work under way?

KETCHUM: The Red Room and the Diplomatic Reception Room and the furnishings for the Green Room -- mostly furnishings that are there today -- had been acquired. The Blue Room had not been undertaken nor had any of the rooms on the third floor nor had the family dining room on the State Floor.

TURNURE: So in the beginning your work was really to deal with the things that had been acquired under this program and to catalog them.

KETCHUM: That's right, and to set up a program whereby they might be more efficiently cataloged after they were accepted, and so that the catalog would reflect

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both the history of the piece as well as all its particular aspects related to the White House and its use in the overall furnishing plan of the house itself.

TURNURE: Who was the Curator at the time when you arrived?

KETCHUM: Mrs. John Pearce was the Curator under whom I first worked.

TURNURE: Then she was succeeded by...

KETCHUM: She was succeeded by William Elder.

TURNURE: Who was also on the staff then?

KETCHUM: Who was on the staff. He joined the White House staff about two months before I came. He came to the White House as Registrar, under Mrs. Pearce; and he succeeded her.

TURNURE: Did you start working directly with Mrs. Kennedy then, or was this later on that you became associated with her?

KETCHUM: I think it was about April of 1962 when I first started having direct contact with Mrs. Kennedy.

TURNURE: Would she come down to your office?

KETCHUM: Yes, quite frequently, in fact. We were in the process of moving our office from what had been known as the Map Room, the room that Franklin Roosevelt had used on the south side of the ground floor quarter for a map room and a briefing room during the Second World War, to what had been used as an upholstery

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shop in the beginning of the first year of the Kennedy Administration.

TURNURE: Previous to that it had been the old, family kitchen.

KETCHUM: It had been, during the nineteenth century, the family kitchen; that's right. It was turned into a broadcast room after the Truman renovations, and it was from this room that President Eisenhower made some of his addresses to the nation which were televised and radio-broadcasted. So this room and its historic nation's marks above the fireplace and its vaulted ceilings and the interior of the ground floor became our office about April of 1962. It had served as such ever since.

TURNURE: Then when the change came of Mr. Elder's succeeding Mrs. Pearce, did you then find that you were increasingly closer to Mrs. Kennedy?

KETCHUM: Very much so. Yes, I would say that from the summer of 1962 throughout the remainder of the Fine Arts Committee under Mrs. Kennedy's direction of this program, there was a very close working relationship.

TURNURE: Did she delegate certain aspects of the restoration work to you, particularly? Or were you working on overall projects?

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KETCHUM: I'd think we were working on overall projects. When Mr. Elder was not in town or was working on something which specifically took up his time for a particular project, I would work directly with Mrs. Kennedy at that point. But I would say, more or less, that it was a relationship encompassing most of the things that

were being carried forth. Mr. Elder, of course, being spokesman for the office, was quite often busy lecturing throughout the country, and so forth. So, as a result, while he was away, we would be representing the office and doing the work which Mrs. Kennedy was directing.

TURNURE: Did she have an advisory committee, then?

KETCHUM: The Fine Arts Committee, as it was originally set up, also had an advisory committee made up of twenty odd museum curators, art historians, directors in the field of museum work, and so forth throughout the country, that served as a committee to assist the Fine Arts Committee proper. Of course, the third branch to be set up was in the fall of 1961 when the Paintings Committee was organized under the direction of James Fosburgh.

TURNURE: Obviously, when you're dealing with so many groups, some people are going to emerge as more dominant, and some people will be able to spend more time. Who were the people that you feel worked the

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closest with Mrs. Kennedy or contributed the most on this project?

KETCHUM: I think among the people who contributed most, was, first of all, James Fosburgh, who was the chairman of the Paintings Committee, who contributed as much or more. Mr. Henry Francis duPont who gave very generously of his time throughout the program and was able to lend the program the background in literature and certainly the reputation and respect for an institution which was recognized throughout this country and abroad. Those, basically are the two people who stand out in my mind. Various other people contributed to specific projects.

TURNURE: Like Mrs. Mellon, in terms of flowers.

KETCHUM: In terms of the landscaping and the Rose Garden, I don't think there is anyone who is more an unsung heroine, in so many respects, as Mrs. Mellon in this case. Exactly.

TURNURE: And all this time Mrs. Kennedy was taking a real interest and spent a lot of her time.

KETCHUM: Yes, yes. I think Jane Engelhard is another person who certainly gave. In terms of specific rooms, she and her husband were responsible for the Family Dining Room, just as Secretary and Mrs. Dillon were

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responsible for the Red Room, the first room to be completed in the program. And like so many committees, I suppose you have a problem with people who are not able to give of their time; and we just did not hear as much from them as you would hope. But this goes hand in hand with the committee system.

TURNURE: The first step was that an overall plan was drawn up of what should be done to the White House?

KETCHUM: That's right. Exactly. It was agreed that the White House could not reflect any particular administration as far as furnishings and it could not reflect one particular time in our history; but, rather, it should reflect the best, going right back to the period of the house itself and its completion, so to speak, with the John Adams family in 1800 and coming right on through this century. This is exactly as the program has been carried out. The same is true with the paintings collection as well as the furnishings; the best part of American pictures, the finest American paintings and watercolors, again, many of them tracing through the portraiture of famous Americans, not only presidential portraits, as once existed in the White House. It had been considered strictly as a

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collection of the Presidents and some of their First Ladies and a few Presidential Hostesses. Now there is an entirely new dimension explored. This was an area which, now coming to fruition, we find not only shows the best, but it very greatly shows us the heritage the house and our nation can epitomize in such a way.

TURNURE: This could have been an overwhelming plan to many people. Did Mrs. Kennedy have a facility for making people work, or a drive or a spark?

KETCHUM: I think that the facility for making people work stemmed from the fact that she worked so damnably hard on the project herself. Page after page of yellow, legal-sized pads were filled in her own handwriting: her thinking on paper, what she thought it should be. This was after consulting any number of people; but, nonetheless, she took all the advice, and then tried to place it in the perspective of the house itself, what it should represent. She came forth with the tenets of the philosophy which can guide the heritage and history of the house.

TURNURE: Did she know a great deal about furniture before?

KETCHUM: Indeed. Not only that, but her knowledge and her respect for history was something which manifested itself in so many ways -- in both getting the program under way and guiding it throughout.

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There are so many facets of the program which have been brought forth since then: the field of interpretation as far as the White House is concerned, for example; her creation of the White House Historical Association, first of all to allow the almost two million visitors a year to come to the White House and take some tangible proof of their visit away with them.

TURNURE: Can you explain what the White House Historical Association is and when it developed?

KETCHUM: It was an organization which was private and nonprofit, organized in late '61 and early '62 to publish materials related to the history and the furnishings and the all-encompassing factors that make the White House what it is, the living museum.

TURNURE: They are the ones who put out the guidebook.

KETCHUM: Their first project was putting out a guidebook on the White House, which had never been done before. After they were organized, they got together with National Geographic, working out the production end, borrowed money, and began going through the rooms.

TURNURE: Did she play a great hand in the concept of the guidebook? Did she give specific ideas of what

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it should be?

KETCHUM: Completely. Not only specific ideas, but suggestions came again from many quarters as to what a guidebook should look like and how it should appeal, and so forth. She realized full well that it can't be something which would be a supplement of a children's magazine. It should be something rather, that would be on a greater level, a challenge to the youngsters, something which would whet their appetites both for history as well as their knowledge of the house itself. She sat down and worked out the basic structure of the book and its sections and then, from that point on, reviewed every single word that went into the guidebook as well as every single photograph. Whether it was layout (she was able to draw from the newspaper background in her career), or whatever it might have been, it was always something...

TURNURE: But she always had a specific idea of how to communicate this stuff.

KETCHUM: Exactly of how it should be treated. Precisely. She knew exactly what she wanted. As any times as anyone in the production and might want to disagree with her, they were soon quite aware of the fact that not only did she know what she was

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talking about, but she knew what would lend the greatest amount of dignity to the project.

TURNURE: Would you say that she put this overall project above any other project that she ever undertook in the White House? She always had time for it; whatever she was doing, was there always a moment, if it was important, when you could speak to her about it?

KETCHUM: In terms of the guidebook itself?

TURNURE: No, I was speaking of the whole restoration project.

KETCHUM: I think you would have to say the entire restoration project. I can say that there was never a time that I can think of, that she didn't have the time, that you didn't feel that no matter whether she was in Palm Beach or whatever she might be at that point that she didn't want to be right there through communication of one type or another, wanting to deal with the problem. I remember one day specifically. She was recording thoughts on her latest projects from Palm Beach; and these, in turn, would be played back over Signal Corps. It seemed like we were going to be able to hit the top forty most popular Signal Corps recordings of the week in one day because then there were at least four messages which came forth. She was developing another thought as she was giving them.

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TURNURE: This is an interesting thing to know about. If she couldn't reach people on the telephone, if she had a thought when it was late at night, she would pick up a phone and call the White House?

KETCHUM: And they would record it. In turn, it would be played back to you when you got back to your office.

TURNURE: That's a marvelous system.

KETCHUM: That's right. Yes, we use this. In fact, at one point there was one very involved message, which went on for perhaps twenty or twenty-five minutes. We had no one in the office who was that proficient in shorthand, really; and so Signal played it back for us two times. Then, finally, they brought the tape over on the belt which it was on, and said, "We will be happy to loan a machine to play this back on, if you would like. Use this authority..."

TURNURE: Did she do this frequently? I've never heard of it.

KETCHUM: Yes, she did. On several occasions. She did it from Hyannisport, as well. I can think of any number of times this was done.

TURNURE: She used to do it when she'd go to the country on weekends, I believe. Particularly, over the weekends,

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so that it would get back to your desk.

KETCHUM: Yes. If we were working on a new edition of the guidebook, for example, and while sitting down she felt that any notes that she had sent back on it, a page at a time, were not explicit enough, and she did not want to bother you at the time but felt that you should know about this, then she would in turn refer to her notes and go into her feelings at great length on this particular matter. So it was a means of communication. No matter how far afield she might have been at the time, she was sitting just as close as the machine or the telephone. She was always there. You had this feeling of not only personal interest, but the fact that she was such a close contact, in such close communication, you would do your dead-level best to make certain that the best solution was reached. It was reached as expeditiously as possible.

TURNURE: Once the furnishings had been acquired, would she actually be with you when the room was being hung and arranged and make suggestions?

KETCHUM: Yes, indeed. Whenever paintings were acquired, the proper framing was taken care of. They were cleaned and restored, and so forth. They would be gathered

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together in terms of how they would fit into a particular room and so forth; and then it would be all done. The carpenters' shop would send the movers and picture hangers and so forth, whoever was advising her -- whether it would be Mr. du Pont or, usually with hangings, it was Mr. _____ would be on hand, and she would be there.

TURNURE: She'd really work herself and would get quite exhausted, wouldn't she?

KETCHUM: Yes, very much so. I remember one point. Sears Roebuck employees, at Christmas of 1962, presented the White House with five Indian portraits, painted by Charles Byrd King, here in Washington, at the time that these Indians were part of the official delegation -- about fifty -- representing many tribes. They were invited to the White House by President Monroe and subsequently painted. She wanted them to go in the library, which was all well and good. We had designated the hour of five o'clock for when they would be placed in the library. She had spent some time with the

youngsters that afternoon, so she brought them along. She was quite intrigued by what Caroline's reactions, especially, would be to how these Indians should be placed. It

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ended up, as they still are today, that Caroline's luck at whom she thought as the most prominent-looking Indian -- and Indian who was outfitted not only with his jewelry and so forth, but an enormous headdress -- should have the uppermost position on this panel, on the wall of the library. The two others would go underneath because their dress and appearance did not seem to merit quite the place of honor that the particular chief did.

TURNURE: How interesting.

KETCHUM: And this is how they were placed.

TURNURE: Really by Caroline.

KETCHUM: It's the same thing in wanting her to question, in wanting her to ask not only what they were as far as tribes were concerned, but what they were doing in the White House. It's the same feeling. Many points about these paintings were certainly far above and beyond Caroline's comprehension at that point. But, nonetheless, it's the same thing as far as the guide is concerned for the seven, eight, and nine year olds who buy it today. They will question why they were there.

TURNURE: Aside from being interesting to work with, she must have been entertaining and amusing.

KETCHUM: I must say that being too much of a nut on occasion, as far as my personal decorum is concerned, and one

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who enjoys a happy time, enlightening, and relaxing time, I don't think that I shall ever meet a person who has a more acute sense of humor than has Mrs. Kennedy. This ability to make the most frustrating times, whether you were up against the wall because of questions that Washington newspaper women were posing -- questions that you couldn't always answer because you didn't know the answers to them -- or situations which perhaps would be misconstrued in the press, was one that always allowed her to see the light side as well as the realistic side. You came out realizing, having merged the two, that not only was life very much worth living, but you could always tackle a problem accordingly and come out and see the happy merits in a problem. So the problems didn't exist from the woeful, sad, and dreary outlook that they can in many situations. Rather, they were a happy challenge; and it was always the funny, humorous aspects of each question.

TURNURE: Did she draw the President into this a great deal? Did she ask his advice on most things?

KETCHUM: Yes, indeed she would ask his advice. His love and acute awareness of history made him always someone to rely on, someone to turn to. I think that granted the duties of the Presidential office, especially

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embodied by the role formed by President Kennedy, were such that he could not always give his time to her on so many of these questions, which she just had to solve by herself. But he was always very much aware of what was going on, what project would be next...

TURNURE: ...and would come to see the rooms as they were made.

KETCHUM: Exactly. Very much so. I suppose that of all the rooms, the Green Room, with its New England, federal pieces, was probably very much a favorite of his and a favorite throughout his White House career.

TURNURE: She really decorated his office too, didn't she? Wasn't that one of her projects?

KETCHUM: Yes, it was. Of course, it was the last project. It was underway when the trip to Texas was made.

TURNURE: Didn't he also share in some of the really basic decisions? Maybe you could tell a little bit of the chronology of the Blue Room because I know that he had some fears about it.

KETCHUM: He had some great fears of a return to the Empire Period of Rome, a period in American decorative arts which has not really been appreciated because there were so many very ugly pieces which were made at that time. I think that her awareness of his fears for it made her that much more afraid of what the end result would be, even though there was so much background

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that had been developed and which we knew of as far as basing the furnishings on the plan of the room. It's the only room in the White House that has all of its original or exceptionally fine copies of pieces that have been there.

TURNURE: You knew what the room looked like?

KETCHUM: We knew what the room looked like. We knew how many pieces. We knew

where they were placed, in many instances. Just the fact that the Blue Room was not to be completely blue as far as its wall covers was enough, I suppose, to shake most people. When it is pointed out that at the time of the Monroe Administration the room had been pink, we assume from the historical perspective that color should not play that important a role, although the color blue has been always associated since the days of Martin Van Buren. But we went back one administration previous to the Monroes, to the time of Dolly Madison, just before the blue walls were white. Hence, this is the closest period to the period of furnishings.

TURNURE: The President was concerned that it might become a Truman balcony, but it has turned out to be very successful.

KETCHUM: It has turned out to be one of the most successful rooms.

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TURNURE: Did Mrs. Kennedy prepare her project very carefully so that it could be presented to him with all the proper essentials?

KETCHUM: Yes, but even on the day that it was to be shown to the President for the first time (work was done over Christmas of 1962, while they were away during holiday time, and she came back to find the hanging and so forth), she very much feared that it was going to be wrong in his eyes. No matter how carefully the steps were taken along the way, she still had this doubt. Yet, I think that if she were only to have stopped and analyzed, as she must have done, what went into this room, so many different aspects, she would have realized that her fears would have been unfounded, as they were. A few hours later he was completely taken and realized very much what an important contribution this room would be to the White House.

TURNURE: I believe that he was the one who really made the basic decision to darken all the floors on the State Floor.

KETCHUM: That's right.

TURNURE: That's interesting.

KETCHUM: Exactly. This was something which had never been done before. In fact, this now means that the three

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State Parlors, in which most of the paintings collection on the State Floor are hanging, have a great deal of unity. The rooms are what you would hope they would be, through the fact that they are tied-in this way.

TURNURE: Did he have a very good eye for things?

KETCHUM: I think that he had an excellent eye. I don't think that he always found some of the pieces to his liking. I think that he was intrigued by the historical significance, of many of them. He always loved to share his fantastic knowledge with any number of groups. I remember, in particular, the day of October 19, 1963, when the National Trust was coming to the White House for a reception. He had a very involved schedule that day. Would he meet them? About noon, he agreed definitely that he would do anything that he could to address them. This was a group of well over a thousand. So, wanting to know more about the National Trust, to make certain that he realized full well the contribution that groups of this type had been making to the cultural and historical aspects of this nation's heritage, he placed a call to our office. It was explained to him by Bill Elder, who was then Curator, what specific projects the Trust had been working on. He nodded and not only accepted this knowledge for certain projects, but also bringing to the conversation

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various aspects of their work, of which he was well aware. Within an hour and a half, he went out to the South Lawn, stood in front of this group that was stretched out before him, and came forth with one of the most telling statements of what their contribution could be in the future, what we were trying to do with the White House, and was just, like so many other moments, completely spontaneous.

TURNURE: As a matter of fact, I was there; and it was not even an hour and a half, because he had some notes that Bill had given him. And he said, "I just really now know that I can do it." I remember that he walked around his office three times with his hands behind his back, thinking, and then just went out. He even ended up with a poem, which was so fitting:

"Safe upon the solid rock
The ugly houses stand.
Come and see my shoddy house
Built upon the sand..."

TURNURE: Did the President call you from time to time on specific things, beyond this one example you've just given?

KETCHUM: One time in particular I recall was when there was a visit -- Pam, I think that you can provide if not dates, the names -- it was the last Irish visit, that of Sean Lemass in the fall of 1963.

TURNURE: Yes, in October.

KETCHUM: The President was very interested in tying-in the

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fact that the White House had been designed by an Irish architect, namely James Hoban, and Hoban's Irish heritage, and, in particular, what he had done in Dublin. It's long been thought, as it still is today, that Hoban had worked as a young tradesman, a young artisan, on the construction of the Duke of Leinster's House in Dublin, which is today the home of the Irish Parliament. So the President wanted to pinpoint these facts, and it was the morning of the arrival. So I picked up the phone, and he specifically asked for this information to make certain that he had the full background on this, and would we please verify it with the Irish Embassy. Unhappily, the Irish Embassy was out getting their flags and getting their children and so forth all assembled in best bib and tucker. There was no one at the Irish Embassy except a switchboard operator, with a very deep brogue, whom we could barely understand. She could understand our problem and told us the difficulties. We finally dropped the idea in the Irish Embassy and went back to getting as much information as we had at hand and also with the help of the Library of Congress. We called him back

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immediately and came forth with this information, which he immediately used to make Lemass feel as much a part of the American scene and, in particular, the White House scene as anybody could possibly feel. He put him entirely at ease with this common bond that would link not only the countries, but this particular residence with the Irish Parliament. But I guess it's not so much a statement you remember, a personal memento of your mind's eye but, rather, the times when he was supposed to be, strictly speaking, the President and was not -- he was the man putting you at ease, he was the man trying to make you relax and enjoy yourself. I recall, in particular, the first time that I was ever invited to attend a formal reception at the White House. This was the Judicial Reception of 1962. Having been married just a few, short months before, this to me was a time when you could really put on the dog as far as your wife was concerned, really show off. You really felt extremely important, much more than the low man on the totem pole or the type of person who should have normally been sweeping the floors of the White House. Here was a time when you could really try to rise to the

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occasion and grasp the full meaning of such an occasion. So Barbara worked diligently, whipping up a velvet theatre suit, which after many fittings and so forth (the zipper was installed the night of the reception) finally, off we drove. Being extremely retiring, she did not want to go through a reception line. She felt that this should just be for the judicial members of Washington -- the court and so forth -- but finally decided that it would be a great thrill to be introduced to the President of the United States. She had never actually met

Mrs. Kennedy, either. The reception line, at that point, was in the Blue Room. It kind of went from room to room that evening. We got to the President, and I was certain that he didn't know me from Adam's rib, but nonetheless, I shook hands. Immediately, he looked and said, "You're Jim Ketchum, and you..." He went on, in front of my good wife, to explain my duties, what the duties of the office I was working for in the White House were and so forth, and completely overwhelmed me, at this point. He then went on to talk to Barbara for what seemed an eternity, to me. She was totally mesmerized by the occasion and by his ability to make her feel very much a part, and no matter how lowly my position was, that I was in some

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small way, making a contribution. She, in understanding some of the strange hours and so forth that one would have to keep, felt very much that she could make a contribution in this regard. Then we passed time with Mrs. Kennedy, who, I guess, seeing a familiar face, was very, very, very kind and insisted on spending some time with Barbara. She beckoned the Attorney General, who was standing next to him and went on in line. It was just a time that was extremely personal to me because it was my better half and so forth, and I didn't forget how he and Mrs. Kennedy went out of their way to make you feel that you were making a contribution. What more could one ask? So often one's sense of fulfillment is not based on what you might read in the paper about what you're doing or what anybody might even know.

TURNURE: Just that bit of recognition from the President.

KETCHUM: That's right.

TURNURE: He always really cared about people and knew who they were.

KETCHUM: This is what sticks with me because, of course, the following year we were again invited to the Judicial Reception. This was the last time that we would see them as First Family.

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There are many reasons why, I think, this occasion in December of 1962 was such a memorable evening and why it will always tie in.

TURNURE: He was genuinely interested, too, you could tell. He would devote all his attention to you.

KETCHUM: Yes, exactly. In a minute he was rather shy, and then within a split second later he was able to break through this maze of his own mind and was able to think,

I think, “Aha, I know exactly what can make us brothers, or what gives us a common bond,” so to speak. I know he had this ability with everyone from the White House Gardener to the men in the carpenter’s shop. This ability to share.

TURNURE: Did you often see him wandering down the halls, going back and forth?

KETCHUM: Yes, I was usually coming back from the lunch machines in the West Wing, carrying some ice cream sandwiches for hungry gals in the office and so forth, almost wondering, “Well, what do you do with these things?” You’d just get a wink and a “watch your diet” remark from him, and he’d just kind of laugh on down the hall. That was it.

TURNURE: Did you ever see the children?

KETCHUM: Oh, yes. I’m afraid that if the Lavender Hill mob was ever organized to kidnap any youngsters, I would

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be leading it forth because I spent many happy hours both with Caroline’s school group and also in attempting to steal John from the shop whenever he was there.

TURNURE: What was the story you used to tell John that he loved so about the Russians?

KETCHUM: Oh, the Russian folktale about Baba Yaga the Russian witch, who lived in a house that would rise and lower, rise and lower, depending on the enemy lurking above.

TURNURE: Yes, I remember your telling him that because he loved it.

KETCHUM: Being one of seven children, myself, I always enjoyed the times one could have with younger brothers and sisters. It was just like family, as far as I was concerned, with these youngsters. I think the saddest day in so many respects, as far as the children were concerned, was the last day of school. This was in December, just before Christmas vacation, in 1963. I went up to say goodbye, and Alice Grimes asked if I wouldn’t like to tell them a story or read something to them. I looked around, and I finally found Clement Moore’s “’Twas the Night Before Christmas.” They all sat down in two or three semi-circles, and I began to read. It was anything but

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a happy occasion to begin with. They were leaving, and we would never be hearing all the shouts of gaiety and laughter through the halls. When you finished, you really felt that a part of you was leaving with them. Then they presented a gift, a photograph that had been taken

of them on the South Lawn a few days beforehand, which means nothing to many people, but which I will always think about whenever I see it, of so many happy times.

TURNURE: Of having all the children in the White House. It makes such a difference to the whole...

KETCHUM: Exactly. It added such a wonderful outlet for anyone who loved to test the reactions of children to various things and, especially, in trying to whet their appetites as far as history is concerned. Oftentimes I would take various objects, things that were perfectly strange, I suppose (hair, earrings of Dolly Madison's -- pins and so forth that she used and had worn with her hair intertwined with President Madison's), to explain how people lived. I could take up a fire bucket and prepare them for a visit to Mount Vernon by showing them something which Mount Vernon had or by tying-in stories of children with some of these homes, like the Custis children, who were raised at Mount Vernon. I could

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tell them about the Theodore Roosevelt children, although not so much in terms of their days at the White House. We always felt that the children should see the White House as any other child would and try to make them feel that their school was not such a special thing just because it was located there. It was really a school, first and foremost. We wanted to get them to look beyond this.

TURNURE: Was Caroline particularly interested in these things, even though she lived in the White House?

KETCHUM: She was very interested; and always, because she was so accessible -- many times in the day her classmates were not there with her -- she would love to insist that you ask questions pertaining to some of the various places that she would discuss. She would always insist on some of these things. Of course, you would come forth, and it would prove how much she had retained, because the answers were always there. Sometimes she gave more of an answer than you had originally given her because she had asked her mother or father what it was all about.

TURNURE: She's a very inquisitive child, wouldn't you say?

KETCHUM: Yes, indeed, she is. Because I've been raised with horses and loved them, she was also understanding of the

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wonderful aspects of this world, we used to talk about horses a great deal. After she left the White House, she sat down one evening and said that she was able to draw

just about anything, and I said, “Well, draw something that will please me.” She remembered that I used to tell her about a mare that I had, whose name was Topsy, a great Chestnut Morgan; and I told her that she had had three colts. About half an hour later, after sitting behind a chair (actually, crouch-on-the-floor kind of chair) in the Georgetown house, she came forth with not only Topsy, but three colts.

TURNURE: She had remembered the story?

KETCHUM: She had remembered the story from many months back. It said on the top “To Jim, from Caroline -- Topsy and Her Babies.”

TURNURE: And you still have that.

KETCHUM: I still have it, indeed. It’s a great memory, again. I must say about John that he was able to warm the hearts of any group of people. But one particularly difficult afternoon I was having was with a group of Colonial Dames that I was leading through the house on tour. They were exceptionally caustic, it seemed to me, with some of their questions. They were really

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probing and wanting to know somewhat more than I thought we had time for, but I was attempting to be as patient as I could be. Suddenly there was a wild shout of, “Hiya, Jim!” coming from the hallway outside of the Diplomatic Reception Room. Then a figure just darted in and did nothing but grab me around the knees, with a big hug. That was John. He completely melted every single...

TURNURE: The whole group.

KETCHUM: That’s right. They went away the happiest group. Nothing that I could have ever told them, no matter how detailed or painstaking, could have given them as much...

TURNURE: ...pleasure, I’m sure, seeing...

KETCHUM: ...insight, I think, into the fact that the White House is a living...

TURNURE: ...place where a family...

KETCHUM: ...where a family...

TURNURE: ...and where there’s fun and life...

KETCHUM: ... can exist in such a wonderful way.

TURNURE: It really makes a difference having children in the White House, doesn't it? It gives sort of a lightness?

KETCHUM: We think of everyone being eighty-five, going on 105. This is, again, such a complete departure so far as

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these years were concerned.

TURNURE: Did you ever go on any sort of field trips or expedition with Mrs. Kennedy when she'd go out to the warehouse or to look at things?

KETCHUM: No, we'd go out looking for her, especially in Georgetown and so forth, and we would go down in the basement with her. But never can I really recall any field trips outside the house. Oftentimes, when she was away and would come across a piece, she would get in touch and report it back and so forth. Then we would find out a little more information.

TURNURE: Where were you at the time you heard that the President had been shot?

KETCHUM: I was sitting in our office at the White House, in the broadcast room, which we described earlier. A messenger, who was delivering the mail, had just heard it over one of the communications feed-ins in the White House. He came in and said that he had heard that the President had been shot. There were two girls in the office, Blair Whitehead and Nancy Hough at that point. We raced to the elevator, which was free. The house was extremely peaceful, it seemed to me, so we thought that it just must be a joke. We pressed the button to the third floor

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and raced down to the end of the third floor into a small sitting room on the southeast corner of the third floor. We turned on the television set and got nothing except daytime shows that were on. Then we got CBS Eye, shortly thereafter; and Walter Cronkite came on and broke the news of what had come over the wire. Finally we had a picture, just of Walter Cronkite, and switched back and forth between CBS and NBC. We stayed there until it was finally announced that the President was dead.

TURNURE: Then during the next three days, did you move into the White House?

KETCHUM: We stayed beyond the normal working hour that night, I recall going off to the South Lawn with Alice Grimes, who had been upstairs that afternoon with

Caroline and John. I remember feeling the lash of helicopter blades as they deposited one group after another from Andrews Air Force Base -- various Cabinet members, congressional leaders, and so forth -- to the White House for a meeting with President Johnson. That night I went home, and very late that evening I had a phone call from the White House. It was Bill Walton who was someone who had been working on plans for the decoration of the East Room, as far as how it had been during the Lincoln Administration. I was

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referring him to various books and so forth in our office. The next day was Saturday, and I came in about eight-thirty in the morning and did all that was possible. Mrs. Kennedy called and said that she was most interested in having the furnishings in the President's office photographed and, in particular, having copies made of the paintings. We went to work on that right away.

TURNURE: That was Saturday?

KETCHUM: That was Saturday. I spent most of Saturday at the White House. Sunday I came in in the afternoon. The President was taken to the Capital. I went home to get Barbara to come back. No, that was Saturday that I went home to get Barbara, actually. On Sunday, I didn't stay that long. It was in the afternoon that I was there. Monday, I went to the funeral. I thought that the traffic and so forth was prohibited was far as going to Arlington, so I came back and watched the ceremonies at the gravesite on television in the electrician's shop near our office. I came back in, and it seemed only five minutes when Mrs. Kennedy was on the phone again asking about some engravings which we had been in the process of purchasing for the White House collection, considering them for the Oval Room on the second floor. She

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wanted to know if they had arrived yet. I said that, yes, they certainly had. She said, "President DeGaulle is coming, and a few others will be received up on the second floor. Could you see if you could hang them?"

NOTE: Mrs. Kennedy's call about rehangng Yellow Oval Room was made to me at home late Sunday evening, November 24, 1963.

TURNURE: It's extraordinary that she could be able to think of something like this.

KETCHUM: To think of it immediately. And it was not five minutes after I had left the gravesite viewing on television. So I got them, and I got hammer and nails and so forth and went up. I went to the third floor and came down a stairway near the Queen's Room. I walked down the hall so as not to interrupt the family and friends that

gathered in the principal elevator in the west end of the second floor. She turned and saw me and came immediately. The first thing was that the television set was on in that room, and I remember that the President's flag had already been placed on the desk table, which was behind the sofa, which faced the fireplace. I proceeded to take out the aerial wire attachment from the television set, and she said that it should be moved. Then she proceeded to get on one side to help me get it out of the room. We went back into the room; and, literally, she held the

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pictures and I drove the nails, all in a matter of five or six minutes. Everyone else was outside, and she wanted to see it done, wanted to see the room the best that was possible.

TURNURE: What were the engravings?

KETCHUM: These were engravings done of various cities in the United States. There are four, three done by Cartwright and one by Bennet, I believe. They were fairly large -- about thirty-six inches by twenty-four or twenty-five, framed. There was a view of Philadelphia, a view of Baltimore, a view of Washington. Actually, two views of Washington. The engravings were contemporary with the building of the White House, which were quite unique, from a very unusual set-up. That was exactly what was going on, I would say, no later than fifteen minutes after the end of the ceremonies at the grave-site. This indicated, as so many other things have, her desire to show only the very best as far as our country was concerned and to have this certain room with its finest points and its finest pieces that had been gathered for it, so that it could be in complete readiness.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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