

Cordenia Thaxton Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 03/19/65
Administrative Information

Creator: Cordenia Thaxton

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Biographical Note

Cordenia Thaxton was a White House maid and babysitter. In this interview, Thaxton discusses what it was like to work for John F. Kennedy and his family in the White House.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Cordenia Thaxton

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Cordenia Thaxton – JFK#1

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Oral History Interview

with

CORDENIA THAXTON

March 19, 1965
Washington, D.C.

By Pamela Turnure

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TURNURE: This is an interview with Cordenia Thaxton, who is a maid at the White House. How long have you been there, Cordenia?

THAXTON: Just three years.

TURNURE: And you came during the Kennedy administration?

THAXTON: Yes, I came in December, 1962.

TURNURE: So you still had almost a year of working...

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THAXTON: It was actually a little more than a year because — it must have been '61 — I was hired in December, 1961, but I didn't go to work until January 1962. So, therefore, I saw him a year and practically ten months of something like that.

TURNURE: And could you describe your duties in the White House? Were you

working in the family quarters simply?

THAXTON: Yes, I was working in the family quarters. Shortly after I came, they decided to use me as the baby-sitter on Wednesday, Miss Shaw's day off. It frightened me in the beginning because I don't have children and I hadn't been around children too terribly much.

TURNURE: That is rough.

THAXTON: It is. John was such a baby, but I

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didn't know that he was such a big baby until I saw him. I feel in love with him, I think, immediately.

TURNURE: A lot of personality.

THAXTON: Oh, heavens, yes! He's a wonderful child. Of course, Caroline was quite grown up to be four years old. But John just won me, I think.

TURNURE: And did you organize — well, of course, when he was very young you couldn't really take them places. So did you go out on the lawn with them?

THAXTON: Out on the lawn, yes. And his father used to clap his hands to attract his attention. John was just elated when he heard that sound.

TURNURE: He'd run to the office?

THAXTON: He wasn't walking too good then, in the beginning. He was in a stroller most of the time. He would hear the

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sound and practically come out of it.

TURNURE: Really? He just knew that it was his father?

THAXTON: The President would clap his hands, you see; and John knew that he recognized that sound. It was a funny thing for a person to do to attract a child's attention.

TURNURE: Yes, but you get used to it.

THAXTON: Yes.

TURNURE: What about the first time you met the President and Mrs. Kennedy. Do you remember that?

THAXTON: Yes. The first time I met Mrs. Kennedy was in the hall on the second floor, right outside the President's bedroom. She recognized the fact that I was a new face, which was surprising. She was very gracious, very sweet. And the first time I met Mr. Kennedy, they

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had left me to baby-sit myself. Miss Shaw was gone with Caroline somewhere. And John, of course, cried so very hard because he missed Miss Shaw and I was a stranger. So I began to find little things to attract his attention, and nothing seemed to work. The only thing was the little clown that comes out of the box when you play "Pop Goes the Weasel." That seemed to have gotten him quite. So I kept playing it over and over again. And this man walked into the room. I had never seen Mr. Kennedy. He walked into the room signing the very end of "Pop Goes the Weasel," and the jack-in-the box jumped up. He spoke, and I answered. He said, "Hello." I said, "Hello." I didn't know who

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he was. I didn't have the slightest idea.

TURNURE: Really?

THAXTON: John and I were down on the floor, you see. I actually didn't look around. When he spoke, I spoke. He said, "Who are you? Are you new?" I said, "Yes, I am new." So he said, "Did we hire you or did the White House hire you?" I said, "Well, I'm afraid the White House hired me." Then, when he said "we," I realized who this man was; and I was sprawled out on the floor. It was very embarrassing, in a way, you know, not to recognize him. He was quite nice. He was always very friendly, extremely friendly.

TURNURE: And they were so observant. They really knew who everyone was.

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THAXTON: And that's unusual.

TURNURE: Yes, it is, particularly when you know he must be preoccupied about so many things. And did he spend a lot of time with the children?

THAXTON: Oh, lots of time, with Caroline in the beginning. John was small. And then he began to take a lot of time with John. And John dearly loved his father. He wanted to go everywhere he went. Everywhere. And the “la-pa-ca,” as he called the helicopter, was his great love.

TURNURE: What did he call it?

THAXTON: The “la-pa-ca,” in the beginning.

TURNURE: He was crazy about helicopters all the time, wasn't he?

THAXTON: Yes, quite crazy about them.

TURNURE: But in the last bit of months he must have had so much more fun in communication

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with his father because he was really growing up then.

THAXTON: Yes, he was really growing up. He had lots of communication, as you say, with his father. He wanted to see him every morning, and usually he'd come to the office to see him.

TURNURE: And would you go up and bring him back on a day like that?

THAXTON: Only on my days that I baby-sit. At night the President would take John swimming sometimes. Of course, rarely in the winter, you know, because they had to come back outside. Actually, it wasn't outside, but it's very cold in that hall. But he'd take John and Caroline swimming warm nights. John would go to the office to see him otherwise.

TURNURE: And would the President make up stories

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and play games with John and Caroline?

THAXTON: Yes.

TURNURE: Can you remember any of the games that they had?

THAXTON: Actually, they were really little boy and father games. They all seemed to run “according to Hoyle” more or less.

TURNURE: You must have seen a lot of state visitors, then, that came.

THAXTON: That is one regret I have. I never saw too many. I saw Mr. Johnson when he came to visit in Hyannis Port before he was sent overseas with Mr. Rusk, in August, the summer before.

TURNURE: August of '62?

THAXTON: Yes.

TURNURE: And then in the evenings when they'd have a State dinner, occasionally would you be there with the children when the guests came?

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THAXTON: No, the guests would come, and the children would be sent out to meet the guests. I would not go out with them. Lots of times, Provie would come and get the children and take them to meet certain dignitaries.

TURNURE: When you weren't taking care of the children, you were helping Mrs. Kennedy then or were you helping the President?

THAXTON: On occasion, yes. Two summers I went away with them.

TURNURE: Up to the Cape?

THAXTON: Yes, when Miss Shaw was on vacation. One time, it was a month — a little more; and one time it was forty-some days.

TURNURE: Was it a different atmosphere when you were working in a house rather than in the White House?

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THAXTON: Yes, entirely different.

TURNURE: The children were around all day long with their parents?

THAXTON: Yes. It was entirely different because it seemed as if everybody was more relaxed. There wasn't that tension that always seemed to be in the air at the White House.

TURNURE: Could you tell me, do you remember where you were at the time of the assassination?

THAXTON: Yes. I was at work, at the White House, in the sewing room. The radio was very low. You really couldn't tell it was on. You could hear the music, but when the commentator said something you couldn't hear it. Lucinda and I were talking, and one of us heard something about the President of the United States. So

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we turned the radio up. And Lucinda said, "Oh, my God, he's dead." It just seemed to me that was the way it would be — that a shot would be fatal. It was a shock, quite a shock.

TURNURE: I remember that when I heard, I called Miss Shaw, and she said that she was sewing in John's room, but she didn't have the radio going. So you were on the same floor that she was on.

THAXTON: No, actually, I was on the third floor.

TURNURE: The sewing room.

THAXTON: Yes.

TURNURE: You stayed in the White House until Mrs. Kennedy came back?

THAXTON: Yes, I stayed until two o'clock the next day because all the family was

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to come in.

TURNURE: So, you didn't see Mrs. Kennedy Friday night.

THAXTON: No, I saw her Saturday. I felt at two the next day, in the afternoon.

TURNURE: Oh, I see. Were you on duty Sunday and Monday, the day of the funeral?

THAXTON: Yes. I was so excited that I wouldn't be able to make it because the house was full of guests first. But Mrs. Kennedy had sent all of us the little invitations to the funeral. So after everything was squared away, more or less, we all took off to the funeral. We had to walk because there was no possible way to ride.

TURNURE: Then you stayed with her until she left the White House? You didn't go to the Harriman's house?

THAXTON: I went to the Harriman's house to

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baby-sit once, and then across the street once.

TURNURE: That was nice that you could keep touch. It meant a lot to her and probably to the children, especially, to have a familiar face.

THAXTON: And to me. It meant a great deal to me.

TURNURE: And did you have to help with all the packing? That must have been a very difficult time.

THAXTON: No, not really with the packing because there was the Johnson's furniture that was being gathered. No, I didn't help with the packing of Mrs. Kennedy's things.

TURNURE: Is there anything you could think of that you'd like to say at the end about your feelings about the period you were there?

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THAXTON: The year and ten months that I did know the Kennedys was one of the most exciting of my life, and I do mean that from the bottom of my heart.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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