

Gabriel Francis Piemonte Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 4/08/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Gabriel Francis Piemonte (1909-1991) was a Massachusetts political figure. This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy's 1946 campaign for Congress and his relationship with the Italian-American community in Boston, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

with

GABRIEL FRANCIS PIEMONTE

April 8, 1964
Boston, Massachusetts

By Frank Bucci

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BUCCI: Gabe, in 1946, when the late President Kennedy first decided to run for public office, what position did you hold in public life?

PIEMONTE: I was a member of the legislature.

BUCCI: You were in the [Massachusetts] House [of Representatives]. Right? Did Jack Kennedy approach you for any support in that election?

PIEMONTE: Yes, he did. But the first contact we had with him was with the Christopher Columbus Catholic Center, you remember.

BUCCI: That's right, yes.

PIEMONTE: I had tried to get the White Fund to take over the building as a youth center for the area and have a swimming pool put there. When I was running against what appeared to be a stone wall, I sought the cardinal's help; he was then the archbishop. I pointed out that the Christopher Columbus Catholic High School didn't even have a gymnasium, and that certainly wasn't up to standards. We had a talk. As a result, we hit upon the idea of the youth center and tried to raise funds. After we were in operation--that is, a fund drive--for several months, Kennedy volunteered to do some work and came down. There was a young chap with him. You should know his name. I think he's in [Washington, DC] now. I think that was really his first

steps--his initial steps--in running for office down here. There's no question in my mind, as events turned out, that perhaps one of the reasons he even spent as much time as he did and took as much interest was to develop the groundwork for his campaign.

BUCCI: Gabe, you're a seasoned politician now. In those days how did he impress you as a comer in politics?

PIEMONTE: There's no question in my mind that he was a comer. Very frankly, I was a little bit disappointed that he didn't have the public appreciation of his full personality. I think he himself didn't realize how receptive the people of this area--especially the people of Italian extraction--were to clean cut persons. Somehow or other I got the impression along the line that his advisors weren't letting him be as free as he could, and that they were doing an injustice to him trying to put him across on the fact that he was a Kennedy rather than the personality that he was.

BUCCI: To what do you attribute this attraction for the Italo-Americans to this so-called Irishman--rich Irishman?

PIEMONTE: Well, at that time, frankly, they weren't offered too much of a choice. If you recall, we did have some people who, because of their experience in politics and because of their personality, would have made very attractive candidates. The field was very limited. We did have one candidate against him of Italian extraction--a former city councilor, I believe, under the old ward system.

BUCCI: Who was that, Gabe?

PIEMONTE: [Joseph] Joe Russo.

BUCCI: Was Joe Russo a candidate against him? In 1946?

PIEMONTE: One of the fights. I think it was '46.

BUCCI: You think in '46.

PIEMONTE: Either that, or he was going to run against him. People were trying to interest [Enrico] Capucci to run against him. Anyway, I think that there were a combination of things. I don't think it was a question of attractiveness; I think that he stood out among all of the candidates at that time. There were a number of candidates, and he stood out among them.

BUCCI: Do you remember Kennedy ever coming down there during that first campaign, down to the North End to campaign, Gabe?

PIEMONTE: Oh, sure.

BUCCI: What impressed you in those days?

PIEMONTE: What impressed me?

BUCCI: Yes. In his campaign approach.

PIEMONTE: The failure of his advisors to realize that he could have really got the Italians--or at least the people from this area--to warm up with him; that they didn't have to put him across as a Kennedy, but he, in and of himself. . . .

BUCCI: So you think that, actually, at the beginning he was lucky to be successful by being actually mishandled? At least in this area.

PIEMONTE: No. Of course, he wasn't successful in this area. In this area I think the statistics will show that he didn't get the vote that he could have gotten if they had just had him present himself to the voters as a candidate--and as a Kennedy.

BUCCI: Do you remember any of the original crowd around Kennedy down here, Gabe? I mean names of people who knew Kennedy well, then.

PIEMONTE: Yes, but I got the impression--you can kill the tape; you won't like to have this for the record--that all he used us, very frankly, at that time was just as background to fill in. He really wasn't interested in getting them to support him as supporters.

BUCCI: [William] Billy DeMarco tells us that he had a fairly decent crowd. Billy said he was a. . . . [Interruption] Gabe, you referred to the fact that the people around him didn't allow him to be himself; they held him back. What do you mean by that?

PIEMONTE: I make that observation because I had a chance to see him when he wasn't under the pressure of political cares or political concerns, when he was by himself, and when he was engulfed in, let's say, trying to help out in the Christopher Columbus Catholic Center. Here, as it were, when his hair was down, you could see a real warm person. I can recall, for example, even as the meetings were over, him walking up and stopping at the pastry store where you have the . . .

BUCCI: That's on Hanover Street? Next to the drug store.

PIEMONTE: Next to the pharmacy. And chatting with them. Certainly, at that time you had people not only from this area, but you had people from Cambridge; you had the Leonis; you had a good representation because at that time the committee was made up of representative individuals from not only Boston but as far out as Gloucester. People who were outstanding citizens in their own right and people of means, but people who primarily were interested in trying to

to help each other and were interested, at this particular time, in the Christopher Columbus Catholic Center. Certainly they, at this point, had no knowledge of him running for political office. If they did, they were outside of his congressional district. And yet I could see how they were attracted to him.

BUCCI: So that, actually, the seat of the political campaign may have been sown at the Christopher Columbus Youth Center meetings.

PIEMONTE: Oh, there's no question of that in my mind.

BUCCI: When was this, Gabe? In the spring of '46?

PIEMONTE: In the winter and spring.

BUCCI: In the winter and spring of '46. So that was much before the campaign actually was announced or before . . .

PIEMONTE: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, in the fall of '45.

BUCCI: In the fall of '45 he was active in the Christopher Columbus Youth Center?

PIEMONTE: Yes. The fall of '45 as I recall. Of course, you must remember, like everything else, whether its politics or anything else, timing is a very important factor. His predecessor was [James M.] Curley so that, therefore, he fell right into a swing, as it were. As I say, there was no real effort made by the community at that time or the people holding public who had any stature at that time to run for office. As a matter of fact, my recollection is that a meeting was held in which the late senator, a representative from East Boston, and other attended in which they were trying to unite on a candidate.

BUCCI: That is, to unite on a candidate to win the seat for an Italian.

PIEMONTE: Yes. That was prior even to Kennedy's official announcement. They couldn't get together.

BUCCI: They couldn't get together. So when Kennedy came on the scene, there was a big contrast . . .

PIEMONT: It was almost made to order.

BUCCI: It was made to order. But there was, also, a big contrast of the young new frontiers' type of man and the former congressman who was then in office, James Michael Curley.

PIEMONTE: I don't think that they were than contrasted. First of all, you must realize that the Italian people as a whole like to look up to people that they can respect and so on. Also, the facts will show that Kennedy didn't do too well in the Italian district. He didn't do too well at all here. That's the sad part of it, because I am convinced that he could have done a lot better had he been allowed to really approach the election here in this area as a candidate --just let them see him as he really was and what he had in mind. My recollection of him, my observation, was that, rather than do that, what he did (and there's no question it was done on the advice, maybe, of a few) is that he sought out so-called leaders in the area, and that was the extent of his campaigning down here.

BUCCI: Well, that was in the initial states of his career. But later on, did he finally make his mark with the people in the district?

PIEMONTE: When he went in the Senate fight and the presidential, then it wasn't a question where he had to make his mark or anything. The people knew him for what he was. It wasn't a question of him coming down to the leaders, but rather where the voters had an opportunity to evaluate and, of course, they saw him for what he was. All that does is prove my point that had they followed the same tactics right from the beginning, his victory would have been even greater; he would have made great inroads here.

BUCCI: From your recollections of those days, Gabe, personally didn't you think that he was going to have the success in politics that he had?

PIEMONTE: Yes, and I can almost say I felt he was going to, and I almost felt sorry for him because he was going to reach the top so young, and what more was there for him left after he reached it? His organization was so efficient. As a matter of fact, too efficient. I don't like efficient organizations when they have to do with human beings. I think he lost some of the fun and the appreciation that would have gone with it, or that he had the chance to really get the enjoyment that one gets out of being in public life.

BUCCI: In those days, Gabe did you think that he'd be president some day?

PIEMONTE: Oh, I don't know about president. I felt he would succeed.

BUCCI: He would succeed; at least he'd be in a top position in government. Is there any incident in the life of Kennedy as it affected the district that you remember, Gabe, that stands out in your mind?

PIEMONTE: Yes. I think that, for example, his failure to appoint in positions of prominence people of Italian extraction while he was president sort of left some question in the minds

of people of his real feeling for Americans of Italian extraction.

BUCCI: You think that he never really appreciated the support he got from Italian-Americans in the commonwealth, Gabe?

PIEMONTE: I don't say he never appreciated it. How am I to say whether he appreciated it or not? All I'm saying at this point is, answering the question that you put as to whether I could think of one or two instances, in my mind the most marked instance was his failure to recognize by appointment, if that is recognition, Americans of Italian extraction into places of prominence.

BUCCI: And, still, there are some who'll say that the first cabinet member under Kennedy was an Italian-American, Gabe. How would you reconcile that?

PIEMONTE: They say that was the first one, but it was made, when? And it was made after practically every other group represented was recognized.

BUCCI: Is there anything else, Gabe, that you'd care to contribute?

PIEMONTE: No. As I said before, I think it's a great loss for the American public as a whole and the world that they didn't have a chance to really experience the full warmth of Kennedy through Kennedy. I feel that there was much more of Kennedy than the people, at least of this area, had an opportunity to see.

END OF INTERVIEW