

William Voss Elder III Oral History Interview –JFK#1, 12/15/1965
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Elder, White House Registrar, 1961 - 1963; author, architect, discusses the White House renovation project, the media attention, and the roles of JFK and Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, among other issues.

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Of

William Voss Elder III

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William Voss Elder III – JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

WILLIAM VOSS ELDER III

December 15, 1965
Washington, D.C.

By Ronald J. Grele

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GRELE: Mr. Elder, do you recall when you first joined the White House staff?

ELDER: Yes, it was in October of 1961.

GRELE: In what capacity?

ELDER: I came as registrar.

GRELE: What does a registrar do?

ELDER: Well, the object at that time was just uncovering many fine wares, objects, pieces of furniture that had been in storage, as well as the restoration program was beginning. Objects were coming in, and the registrar there or in any other museum, the job is to record the objects, to see that they're duly registered as part of the collection. A marking system is set up, just a way of knowing what you have.

GRELE: Had you known the president or Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] prior to this time?

ELDER: No, I had not.

GRELE: How did you come about working for the White House?

ELDER: Well, Lorraine Pierce was then curator. She needed an assistant, some data registrar. She wrote to universities where they had programs particularly strong in American decorative arts. I was at that time doing graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania, and I was recommended by a professor there to her and then came down for an interview.

GRELE: You became Curator of the White House in August, 1962?

ELDER: Yes, that's right.

GRELE: You succeeded Mrs. Pierce.

ELDER: Yes, that's right. She had really not.... I came in '61. I guess about in the spring of '62 Lorraine was writing a guidebook and had more or less given up her position as curator to write the guidebook. She went away in June and then in the late summer I was appointed curator.

GRELE: Is this why she left, to write the book?

ELDER: Yes....

GRELE: All right, I'll introduce it. I've heard there was some dispute between Mrs. Pierce and other members of the White House staff. Is that true?

ELDER: No, I would not say that. I think that probably--well, this is a bad way to put it--sometimes it's easier for a man to work for a woman than for another woman to work for a woman. I think that Lorraine had very definite ideas. I think they were often the correct ideas. I think it was a little bit of a personality conflict between Mrs. Kennedy and Lorraine. I do think that Lorraine did a wonderful job; it was just some other things that just didn't work out at the time.

GRELE: What were the substantive issues involved?

ELDER: Well, the exact issues I would say would be a little difficult to pin down. See, I'd have to think about that. The exact issues were, I think, more or less.... We had a Fine Arts Committee. We had a policy that we professed we were going to follow. There were many digressions from this, individuals with certain decorators in New York which were brought in more or less on the side. I think Lorraine wanted to approach it from the straight historical point of view, and it wasn't always possible to do that because of the White House itself, which presented its own difficulties as it could not be a typical historic house-museum in any way. I think at that period perhaps we, by Lorraine leaving, solved many problems, but they all had to come to the head and I think they....

GRELE: You worked directly for Mrs. Kennedy?

ELDER: Yes.

GRELE: What were your duties as curator?

ELDER: Well, it was one job where you absolutely never knew what you were going to do that day because of the tremendous problem of correspondence. A mammoth amount of mail came in each day. And then just being the White House, there were so many people involved. It had to run as a museum; it also had to be a place for public entertaining. My job, I guess, was primarily to acquire appropriate articles of furniture and paintings for the White House collection and working with our committees, sorting through the many things that were offered to us, looking at the various objects....

GRELE: Who was on your staff?

ELDER: I had really only about four people. I had Jim Ketchum [James Ketchum], who replaced me as registrar and is now curator and, when I first came, a girl named Janet Felton who had been a friend of Mrs. Kennedy's. Her title was Secretary to the Fine Arts Commission. After she left, a girl named Blair Whitehead took her place.

GRELE: Did you come into the position of curator after or before the legislation had been passed making the White House a national museum?

ELDER: After.

GRELE: That was afterwards.

ELDER: No, no. Well, I mean, it was before I became curator that it was made a museum.

GRELE: Were you registrar at that time, or was that before you came to the White House?

ELDER: I don't know whether you have the exact dates. I believe that that was done in the very beginning.

GRELE: Do you recall any of the comments about this legislation, any of the difficulties that it encountered? Did you recall anyone telling you how easy it was?

ELDER: Well, I don't remember. I just think it was by.... I've forgotten the exact term--it's called presidential something-or-other.

GRELE: Executive order?

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ELDER: Yes, executive order. That was it. I believe it was done by executive order and everyone always used to say, "Well, it can just as easily be changed by an executive order." and "Just wait until the next president." I do think the Johnsons [Lyndon B. Johnson] have....But I don't think they're particularly interested in the program--the fact that it has remained in this transitional period means that I think it will remain.

GRELE: They thought that another president would....

ELDER: People always used to say that the next president would come in and do exactly as he pleases. However, I felt that there had been enough important people involved, both Republican and Democratic, with great amounts of money involved that if anything were to happen, there would be such a.... No one would really attempt to take down the payment that the Ford Foundation had given and think they could really get away with it, Republican or Democrat. I think with the Johnson administration that things have not changed. I don't think they will now.

GRELE: Who thought that they would change?

ELDER: I think you're always going to get some skeptics. This had never been attempted before. No one had really ever.... You know, particularly among the old staffers of the White House, there has always been a feeling that the first family can do exactly as they please. I used to always say, jokingly, that an outgoing first lady could come downstairs and take the Gilbert Stuart from the East Room, and no one would say anything--no one on the staff would say anything to her. You know, there's always previously been the feeling that they could do exactly what they wanted to--and that's all presidents, even up through the most recent administration before the Kennedys, have always taken things home with them that are not exactly theirs. But it's sort of a way of.... There's always been this kind of nebulous thing between what is a gift to a president and what is a gift to the nation.

GRELE: They can't do this any longer?

ELDER: I think it's been much more firmly defined.

GRELE: Through legislation?

ELDER: Yes, through the legislation. The exterior of the building had always been under the National Park Service. Now the interior of the house, the state rooms, are

under the National Park Service if they can just keep it. You keep reading that it's under the Smithsonian. The Smithsonian in the very beginning had some connection--I would say the first six months of the restoration program--but after that they had no connection with it at all.

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GRELE: What had already been done with the White House when you joined the staff? Do you recall?

ELDER: Well, I think Lorraine had come in that, say, perhaps February or March, and there was already a tremendous backlog. I don't know the figure on the letters, but we used to get maybe a thousand a week when I first came. They had to be read and sorted through. There were piles of these letters. I think Lorraine jumped right in and tried to sort out the letters.

There had been a meeting or two of the Fine Arts Committee. It had been formed. The best pieces of old White House furniture had been recovered from storage. At least, they had begun to do this. The silver had been sorted out. I think the Red Room and Green Room were pretty much on their way. What actually happened in the beginning, which perhaps wasn't the best idea, was that they decided that they wanted to get furniture for those two rooms and they practically went out and bought it--not bought it in a day, but located it in a day. It was all brought down from the best New York antique dealers and Philadelphia and Wilmington antique dealers. But the furniture was really.... They went out and got the furniture they thought appropriate and placed it in the room. Then we used to read in the paper that such and such a table was given by an individual. It meant that they gave the money and their money was used to buy that table.

GRELE: One of the rooms was done in the furniture that James Madison brought from Paris.

ELDER: No, that's Monroe [James Monroe] and that was the Blue Room. That was done afterwards. That was, I believe, opened about Christmas of 1962.

GRELE: Do you recall who made the decisions as to the exact style of the Blue Room?

ELDER: Well, my job as curator should have taken in materials and rugs, et cetera, but I was more interested in the furniture and the architectural history of the building. What had been a bone of contention with Lorraine Pierce and also with me and Mr. DuPont [Henry Francis du Pont] had been a French period decorator named Boudin [Stephan Boudin] who is kind of the last word at Palm Beach and who was always around the White House. Mr. DuPont wouldn't come when he was there and vice versa.

He was more responsible--which was perfectly all right with me--for picking materials. The materials that he picked, though he made the choice, were perfectly agreeable to Mr. DuPont and myself. They were perfectly suitable for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The one where some people felt he went a little bit too far was in the Blue Room. My work

and the work of the Fine Arts Committee--basically the furniture in the room was work that we had done. We had located the original Monroe furniture, put it back with the correct clocks and candelabras that he had also ordered which we were able to find.

GRELE: Where'd you find them?

ELDER: They were all there in the White House, and so many things had just lost their

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identity. There would be books written on the White House in the last twenty years, and they would describe the clocks as being gifts of Lafayette [Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert Du Motier, marquis de Lafayette] to Washington [George Washington]. But if anyone went here in the Archives or just looked over any of the old White House accounts, you could usually find vouchers for all of these things. The furniture that Monroe ordered from Paris was well described in the invoice. It came into Alexandria on a ship. You can match up everything. All this is gilt bronze, and it had been kept. It was all down in the cellar. As recently as ten years ago, a great many things unfortunately, just pieces of furniture, were just burned up by GSA [General Services Administration] when they decided to do away with the warehouse. That just points to the fact that there wasn't anyone really watching over it at all.

GRELE: Then this scavenging that one reads about in the newspapers seems to have been very important, just going down and rummaging around.

ELDER: Yes, rummaging around. No one had really ever examined what was there.

GRELE: Would you care to compare the White House in the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] years and the Kennedy years? You say nothing had been done prior to that time.

ELDER: Well, it really hadn't. The AID [American Institute of Decorators] in the last years of the Eisenhower administration had decided to give the furniture for the Diplomatic Reception Room, on the ground floor. They had donated about ten pieces of good American furniture of around 1800. But again, I think, it was always a question of no one really having the nerve.

Well, in 1902 McKim, Mead and White re-did the White House. In 1902 people didn't really know one way or the other what was good colonial or bad. They did it as they.... They thought they were doing a very honest job. Actually, they just wrecked the building, so to speak, from an architectural history point of view because they removed all of the surviving.... The house had been rebuilt in 1817 and Hoban [James Hoban] had been the architect again. The style was pretty much as it had been in 1794 when it was first built. But in 1902 any bit of 1817 cornice moldings and everything that had survived until 1902-- McKim, Mead and White did away with most of them and made things much fancier. But they only did a surface remodeling.

Then in 1948, probably the most devastating thing that happened to the building was what happened in the Truman [Harry S. Truman] administration. They really came very close to taking it down and replacing it in marble. They just barely missed doing that. They also kept no records of.... If the building were to be restored today it would not be done as it was then. The whole building, you know, was scooped out and replaced with a steel frame. This really wasn't necessary. They kept no records of original cornices. It's just a little record in a workman's report of finding the traces of a dumbwaiter, which obviously was the Jefferson [Thomas Jefferson] dumbwaiter that came up in the Green Room. Well, none of this was recorded, you see. It was pretty much of a, say, hack job.

GRELE: Why was it done this way?

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ELDER: This was done in '48.

GRELE: Never knew why it was done this way or....

ELDER: Well, it was done by GSA--nothing against them. But, I mean, it was done more from an engineering point of view. I think, perhaps, if it were being done now, they would haul in experts also, perhaps from the government, the Smithsonian or any other place to see that it was done in a more sensitive way. Someone used to talk about the ghost of Lincoln [Abraham Lincoln], and I used to say, "Well, there can't be any more ghosts because they removed the very core of the house." The heart of the house is gone. They did try to preserve all the woodwork, plasterwork, and mantelpieces and put them back. So the house has never really been treated in any way.

I don't want to get off the subject but I was just noticing the other day that.... During the Kennedy administration the National Park Service were pushing to replace the wall and the fence in front of the White House. They came up with their plans and were just ready to go through with it, and our office and Mrs. Kennedy discovered it. That fence had been put up there in 1817, I believe, and the stonework was from 1794. It's the same aqueous sandstone that many things are built of around here. The Lafayette Park Association under Bill Walton [William Walton] and the White House Historical Association said it absolutely could not be replaced. You could have a new iron fence but the old stone copings, where Civil War soldiers had scratched their initials and everything, should remain in their places. Well, I see now it's all gone; it's all been ripped down. So I guess the Johnsons didn't really care. That's a little bit disheartening, but overall there is more respect for the house than there has been in the past.

But to get back to what you asked me originally. In 1948, when they did this under the Truman administration, there was an attempt to organize a committee to buy historic furnishings for the building. Mrs. Truman [Bess Wallace Truman], apparently, just said she didn't want them. Most of the furniture was then ordered new, as far as chairs and tables and everything, from B. Altman & Co. in New York. Then that furniture was in use when the Eisenhowers came in.

GRELE: Then there was a decided difference between....

ELDER: Certainly, yes.

GRELE: What were the functions of the Fine Arts Committee?

ELDER: Well, the Fine Arts Committee, as the Paintings Committee and all committees, were made up of many people, and only one or two did the real works. Of course, that's always true with all committees. The Fine Arts....

GRELE: Mr. DuPont, I gather, was one of these.

ELDER: Yes, Mr. DuPont was the one. The other members were friends of the Kennedy's, people all over the country who had fine collections. You might say

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it was a very moneyed commission.

GRELE: With any kind of expertise?

ELDER: The knowledge, you mean?

GRELE: Yes, the knowledge....

ELDER: Yes, they all did, I'd say. The Wrightsmans [Charles B. Wrightsman and Jayne Wrightsman], for example, friends of Mrs. Kennedy's, had a very fine collection of French furniture. Gerald Shea, who has always been a great friend of old Mr. Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] and who is, I'd say, an antiquarian and collector, was on the committee. These people gave things themselves. A lot of them could well afford to and wanted to. They also looked around for things. Very often we would get a table or chair. If you ever wanted something, you just got it there and then got the money, got the donor for it, which wasn't too hard. Mr. DuPont, though, was really the one that did most of the work. For a man of his age, he was very amazing. He would come down and just move everything around. I'd have to move it back the next day, but he was very active.

GRELE: Did the committee oversee your work?

ELDER: No, not to that extent. We used to always, of course, clear everything with Mrs. Kennedy. I, of course, really mentioned to her as much as I should. She was always very aware of what was going on and wanted to be informed of everything that was going on. I would always, weekly perhaps, send her a memo, and she would pop in and out of our office. Our office was right in the building, right down by the elevator, so it was very easy to kind of show her things, or to ask her little questions as they came up day by day.

We used to do a great deal in our office. You had to make decisions yourself. You couldn't send a letter around to each member of the committee. I mean, you knew if someone wrote in and offered a plate from the Jackson [Andrew Jackson] administration, there wasn't any question. You knew it was all right. You just said, "Fine."

GRELE: Mrs. Kennedy then was a kind of liaison between your staff and the committee?

ELDER: No. I would say that I worked directly with the committee, but Mrs. Kennedy was kept informed of everything that was going on.

GRELE: How well did you work with the committee? Were there ever serious disputes?

ELDER: No, I would say really none. But I would say again the committee consisted really of only Mr. DuPont. There were sometimes little things that would happen. One of the committee members was very chummy with one of the large antique dealers in New York. This antique dealer organized--himself, in his shop--what he called the Americana Foundation; his sole existence was to donate furniture to the White House. I remember getting very mad because he was using the White

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House for all it was worth. Certainly, the dealers did in the very beginning....

I think it was Mrs. Kennedy's phrase, or someone said, that a lot of people in the very beginning wanted to use giving a piece of furniture to the White House as a steppingstone to respectability. And the dealers would use them. They would have a piece of furniture that they knew was a Wright, but they'd have a great price tag on it. They would go to someone, particularly in Texas or the Southwest, and say, "Wouldn't you love to give this to the White House?" I remember having somewhat of a squabble--but I was completely backed by Mrs. Kennedy and Mr. DuPont--with this committee member, just saying we would have no more of that.

GRELE: Did you find that this was kind of a recurrent problem with...?

ELDER: It was in the beginning. Then, of course, people would give things. A lot of times, when it was a tremendous amount of money involved, we would have detective services, have someone, run and check on them. There were a few incidences where we didn't really feel that we could accept something of that....

GRELE: Why?

ELDER: Well, there might be a little bit shady business dealings, or....

GRELE: It was thought necessary to keep this respectable in those terms?

ELDER: Yes, uh hmm.

GRELE: Was this Mrs. Kennedy's....

ELDER: But no politics involved as far as Republican or Democrat. It was just a question of....

GRELE: Was Mrs. Kennedy directly involved in any of this? Did you ever hear her comment on this antique dealer in New York or...?

ELDER: Oh, yes.

GRELE: Did she say, "No, we don't want his money"?

ELDER: Oh, yes. I mean, there was no.... I remember, I believe her phrase was just, "Write him a blast and I hope we never [laughter] buy anything else from him." I mean, these were just regular, everyday occurrences. You just had to....

GRELE: What relation did your office have with the White House Historical Commission?

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ELDER: Well, the White House Historical Commission again was.... I don't like to get more committees involved, but there had been a White House Historical Association--I think that's what you're referring to--and they had always existed. David Finley, who had been director of the National Gallery, was in charge of the old White House Historical Association. They had always been in existence but I won't say they had been in a position to do too much. I think years ago when Mr. Joel Christie--the man who just died--gave a very fine chandelier to the Blue Room, say in 1950, they were called in, and they more or less passed on it and said, "This is fine." But they really hadn't been too active.

Then the Fine Arts Committee was formed, made up of a different group, except Mr. Finley was on that. Then the main function of the White House Historical Association became involved around the publication of the guidebook. The *Geographic* [*National Geographic*] was involved. There were all kinds of things there.

One reason I linked.... When Lorraine had been there--I can talk freely. I don't think any of this is that serious; the information is all kind of over now. Lorraine had been asked by Mrs. Kennedy to write the guidebook. She worked on it quite hard. The White House Historical Association had made arrangements for the *Geographic* to publish the book free of charge or at cost, and all the photography was to be at cost. The White House Historical Association, for some reason, didn't want Lorraine to write the guidebook. So, unknown to the Fine Arts Committee or to Mrs. Kennedy, but through the *National Geographic*, they got someone at the *National Geographic*, at the same time, to work on a guidebook the whole time Lorraine was working on hers. They were both done at the same time.

The result was that the *National Geographic*'s was just thrown out. It was pretty bad; it was one of those things like, "Imagine being invited to a steak dinner and you ascend the grand staircase and your eyes are dazzled by the lights of a thousand chandeliers," or something.

So there were these committees that kind of presented problems. Then, that was all straightened out. Their main function became the publication of the guidebook.

GRELE: I've been told that Mrs. Kennedy reviewed the book page by page.

ELDER: Oh yes.

GRELE: Was this why? Because of the dispute or because of her interest?

ELDER: Mostly because of her interest. Well, after Lorraine wrote it, it was published. Of course there were always changes, and so it went into further editions. You know, after anyone does something, you have better ideas. It was done quite hurriedly for the amount of text and the preparation. But, yes, each time there was a revision or I would rewrite something or a picture choice.... She was very interested, I remember, in the choice of which picture we were to use of the president. The one that's in the first and second guidebook--I've forgotten who took that, perhaps it was Bachrach [Fabian Bachrach], but the *National Geographic* never liked it. I remember Mrs. Kennedy insisted that it remain in the third edition. I guess there wasn't a fourth edition. I remember her being very interested in this picture and saying, "No, use the Bachrach one." She said, "It's murky and

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gloomy and gives the oppressive feeling of the office of the presidency." Something to that effect, but....

GRELE: You wrote articles for the guide?

ELDER: Yes, I revised it. I would say the basic core of it, and the layout, though we changed pictures, was done initially by Lorraine. I wrote revisions, and then Jim Ketchum has subsequently written.

GRELE: Do you recall any of the specific revisions that you wrote?

ELDER: Well, there were revisions on the pictures. As we got more paintings we changed the painting section. The book became very much enlarged. We would write revised room descriptions.

GRELE: This was the decided break with the tradition in the White House. Was there ever any comment on this by your correspondents, people who wrote you these letters?

ELDER: People always thought it was a wonderful idea and wondered why it hadn't been done before. No. I think people just accepted it. There was some squabbling. You asked a few minutes ago, who were the people who always said it wouldn't last. I would say some of the ones who said it wouldn't last were the old staffers of the White House who, I think, once they got into the swing of it, liked the idea. But they always felt that....

GRELE: There was also, I believe, an advisory committee to the Fine Arts Committee.

ELDER: Yes. That was made up of mainly museum people, and they came to teas once or twice a year. But they were removed in various parts of the country. If they knew of a piece of furniture, they'd help, but it was more or less just a window dressing as far as the committee went.

GRELE: They had no real function in terms of deciding policy?

ELDER: No real function.

GRELE: In the renovation of the White House was there a general plan?

ELDER: I'd say more a general plan developed than having a general plan at the beginning. You know, they had to represent every period, really, and every president. They could have no cutoff date, as such, because....

GRELE: They didn't have anything from the twentieth century?

[-11-]

ELDER: No, but of course they would keep presidential things there. I don't know, I mean, whether they come here or things that were bought. I mean, if you look at it over a long range, the overstuffed chairs that the Kennedys or the Eisenhowers might have bought might be as important in a hundred and fifty years as now.... No, you can't keep them all. You don't have a twentieth century room, but you certainly come up through, say, the Woodrow Wilson administration, the early twentieth century. They were having no cutoff date. There were places like the China Room where you can have glass and china from each administration. I think they've since put in--we had planned to put in--*vitrines* in the hall where you can have little mementos of each president, maybe a little card for the inauguration of even President Eisenhower or Truman.

GRELE: A little what?

ELDER: Say, a little card, gray card or gray menu.

GRELE: No, I meant.... You said, "Little...."

ELDER: *Vitrines.*

GRELE: What...?

ELDER: Glass cabinets.

GRELE: [Laughter.] Oh, I see. I thought you said "latrines."

ELDER: That's what I had said in a memo myself when I sent it up to Mrs. Kennedy. I misprinted it myself. But I guess that's something that came from Mr. Boudin, the Frenchman. They're just glass cases.

But you can have something from each administration; it doesn't have to be a large piece of furniture. So maybe there wasn't any set direction at the very beginning. Of course, the favorite periods of furniture, the best, are the furniture of the eighteenth century. But I think what eventually happened was that the architectural style of the house kind of could hold things down, because you could always get away by saying, "Well, we want to have something in keeping with the architecture of the house."

As it turned out, the house began in 1794. The Green Room represented that type of furniture, of Jefferson's and Adams' [John Adams] administration. Then the Blue Room represented the rebuilding and the Empire style of Monroe after the fire of 1814. Then the Red Room maybe went from the Jackson to the Van Buren [Martin Van Buren] administration into the late Empire. Now the Lincoln sitting room and the Lincoln bedroom were Victorian, and associated with probably the most important president, the best known president, of the mid-nineteenth century. Then after the Victorian you can kind of go whichever way you want to. There isn't any set period of collecting after the Victorian other than individual pieces.

GRELE: Did you keep much of the Ulysses S. Grant stuff?

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ELDER: Yes, there's a great deal of that left in storage, drum tables and.... It was often very interesting to be able to find a table. I remember finding one table that had a marble top, and then finding two more, and then being able to find the vouchers for them, and finding that they were the three tables that Jackson had ordered for the East Room. Then they had been pushed around for a hundred and twenty years, and now they suddenly turn up. Miraculously, some things like that survived and other things; as I said, a few years ago a great bunch of things that happened to be left, I believe out at Fort Washington.... We had a warehouse. Someone had to make the decision, someone just said, "Oh, this is all junk. Get rid of it."

GRELE: Were there problems involved in, say, finding three marble top tables that you wanted to put in the room, then problems in organizing that room so it was a coherent whole?

ELDER: Yes. We'd try to find things similar to. We often knew the makers' names of various things. These actual tables were supplied by a man named Louis Veran in Philadelphia. At one time they were in the Lincoln bedroom, on each side of the bed. When we did find the three, we put two back in the Lincoln bedroom, during the Kennedy administration. Dick Randall, who had also been on the Advisory Committee, was with me, and we found two Louis Veran lamps, similar to the ones Jackson had ordered for these tables, in a Baltimore antique shop, but we couldn't get them. Mrs. Johnson [Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Johnson] wasn't interested in buying them, you see. I thought perhaps they should but, you know, it was just a lack of interest at that time. That was the kind of thing we would try to do--match up things from the outside that had no White House history but which matched earlier descriptions of things that had been bought for the White House.

GRELE: Whose was the governing intelligence that organized all these things into a particular room?

ELDER: Well, I don't know, Mr. DuPont and, I guess, the curator's office and Mrs. Kennedy more or less arranged it. I would say, in that respect, we all thought pretty much the same and there weren't any great problems.

GRELE: Were there any specific problems with specific kinds of rooms? I believe at one time the Blue Room presented a, sort of a problem.

ELDER: Well, the Blue Room was criticized for its wall covering and this kind of valence around the top. That was pretty much Mr. Boudin's creation. It wasn't entirely wrong. You could find precedent for it. But it was wrong from a historical point of view. A room like that had never existed in the White House. There was some criticism of that room.

There was a great deal of criticism of the Red Room, for example, because it was just outside of the taste of the collector, though it's a very good room of the Empire period.

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I might mention, one of the very great problems working there was the press and the fact that everything you did was under a microscope and that you had to be so careful. You just couldn't please everybody, naturally, and people always tried to make a great deal out of nothing, really, many times. You remember there was a series of articles in the *Post* [*Washington Post*], you know, on how much money each object in the Green Room had cost, which really didn't prove anything. It made the American public feel that they were paying for it. And it was a tremendous amount of money. I don't think the idea ever really came across that it was all done by public contribution.

GRELE: What members of the press were particularly bothersome?

ELDER: Well, I think Maxine Cheshire was. She really, in those series of articles, was out to dig up information, and she went to any length to get it. I remember she

went to Mr. Scalamandre [Franco Scalamandre] and said that she was a White House representative and asked him to show the designs for the Blue Room materials which were supposed to be secret until Christmas. He showed it to her. We were upset, and he was very upset. If anyone was the most bothersome, I think that she probably was. She was kind of.... I think that from the very beginning she perhaps hadn't got as much cooperation from Mrs. Kennedy. Mrs. Kennedy really didn't like the press that much.

GRELE: How did she handle them? Was she aloof?

ELDER: More or less aloof. I guess it was Tish Baldrige's [Letitia Baldrige] job to really handle them directly. I think Mrs. Kennedy really always held them off quite a bit—completely opposite, I think, of Mrs. Johnson. I don't know which would have been the best way to do it. I don't know.

GRELE: How did Tish handle her job?

ELDER: She did it beautifully, I think. Well, I would say, that really wasn't Tish's job. It was partly hers, but I guess mostly Pam Turnure's [Pamela Turnure]. I think both of them did a beautiful job.

GRELE: How was your office staffed? Was it staffed on recommendations from the Interior Department or personal friends of Mrs. Kennedy or just people who happened in?

ELDER: No. Well, I told you how I got my job. Janet Felton, who was secretary to the Fine Arts Commission.... Nancy Tuckerman in New York had been asked to take the job. At that time Nancy didn't want to come to Washington. You know, she later became Mrs. Kennedy's secretary. Nancy recommended Janet Felton, whom Mrs. Kennedy had gone to Farmington [Miss Porter's School] with. I guess Farmington. They both went to Farmington. So Janet got the job by personal recommendation.

But the other members of that office came from.... Jim Ketchum came from the National Park Service. Nancy Huff was a very, very capable girl for her age--a very young

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girl but very capable--whose father worked in the Park Service. She came through the Park Service. Others did, too. But then Blair Whitehead, who took Janet Felton's place--I knew her and she came more or less through my recommendation.

GRELE: These were pretty professional people.

ELDER: Well, no, I wouldn't say professional. Janet Felton had worked in interior decorating in New York. I think Janet Felton had to work a great deal with Mrs. Kennedy. I think she felt the same way that she [Mrs. Kennedy] did and knew a lot of the same people. The job of that particular secretary very often involved doing things

of somewhat, I wouldn't say a personal nature for Mrs. Kennedy, but working between her and her friends. Janet knew most of them anyway, so it was the right kind of secretary for that kind of job.

GRELE: Whatever happened in the running argument with the interior decorator?

ELDER: Well, it kind of... After he did the Green Room and the Blue Room, and he helped with the Lincoln sitting room, there really wasn't that much more to do. I don't know, perhaps he would have come back and done more. He did some things in the Kennedy's own personal living quarters.

GRELE: Was he the man who put all the stripes up?

ELDER: Yes. Stephan Boudin.

GRELE: Very French. How were donations handled?

ELDER: Well, donations would come into our office. At the very beginning there was a tremendous amount of juggling the bookkeeping. You had to be buying things and assigning people's money to various objects. The bookkeeping was handled by our office and with the help of Mr. West [J. Bernard West], who was the chief usher there and then with.... Who was the man who came over from...? I can't remember his name. But it was just, of course, handled as a separate account.

GRELE: Were you deluged with things that had no value at all? Did people send nailing off of a desk or something?

ELDER: Well, it's very funny. Nothing really ever came in by mail. We had a very good system set up for the mail. We would interview people. We've already gone into this but.... We would just put a little letter or two letters on the top of each letter, "gift reject" or "not appropriate." Then again, if something were offered, it would be "p and p", "picture and price." Or people would just send information, and we would send "information thanks." But, as far as various objects were concerned, we really screened out everything pretty well. You got so that you really could tell a lot from.... You could almost tell in the first few lines whether they really had something. If it sounded good,

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we would ask for a picture and a price, and sometimes we asked committee members to go look at various things.

GRELE: This, I imagine, could become a very tender problem with people's sensibilities, telling them it's an inappropriate gift.

ELDER: No, I think that we had a way of answering that pleased everybody. We would

say that it was not appropriate because it was not of the correct period, or that we already had something similar in the collection. They usually understood. Everyone was, of course, answered by a letter that looked like it was hand-done, which it was, to an extent.

GRELE: *Time* magazine, in an article, at one time said that the goal of the renovation was authenticity and coherence. Do you feel that the renovation was authentic and coherent?

ELDER: Yes, I would think so. Well, I won't say.... It's not done in a museum way, but yet how can it in a house such as that? All of the furniture in those rooms is used continually and put to a tremendous beating. I think in its dual or triple existence--the house of the president, an historic house and a place for entertaining--that it is doing the best job it can under those circumstances.

GRELE: You worked directly with Mrs. Kennedy?

ELDER: Yes.

GRELE: How would you describe her tastes?

ELDER: I would describe her taste as being very good overall taste. I think that as far as the American taste and knowledge of American furniture of the eighteenth and nineteenth century.... I think that my approach to it is only one that museum people have, and there's been a great interest in American art and furniture in the last ten years. I think I've been trained in that way of thinking, that vein of thinking, which I don't think she necessarily has or that the average collector has on the outside.

GRELE: Which is?

ELDER: Well, an interest in the eighteenth century and also an interest in the nineteenth century, in the Federal style, the Empire style. I think Mrs. Kennedy knew a good piece of furniture and may not have always been as familiar with the styles as we were. I think she had very good taste. I think her tastes run sometimes somewhat to the European and to the French. I think this is a.... Well, I don't know how people develop tastes. What she had had of her own, and her background, and mother's taste, and everything has not necessarily done this, but I guess this is something that she....

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GRELE: Was there ever a problem about this?

ELDER: No, because as far as French furniture--and I think her favorite style of French was Louis XVI--in the Jefferson, Adams, and Madison administrations the

White House had been filled with French Louis XVI furniture, as were many houses in this country in the early nineteenth century. And then the French Empire.... We certainly were closer in style in America, in the opening years of the nineteenth century, to France than to England, so, as far as the building was concerned, there wasn't any problem. In the upstairs Oval Room, it was perfectly appropriate, I think, for it to be as it was, in the Louis XVI style.

GRELE: How would you characterize her understanding of what you were trying to do? Or your understanding of what she was trying to do?

ELDER: Oh, I think very well. It certainly had all been initiated by her. But I think it was hard for all of us in a way because no one really knew how it was going to work. There were tremendous problems in doing various things.

GRELE: Did you ever come in contact with the president?

ELDER: Yes. Well, I used to see him, being right in there, just see him to say hello to; a brief good day or something, in the hall or something. I came in contact with him a number of times.

GRELE: On specific questions of redecorating?

ELDER: Well, I remember one. There was quite an incident about the Baltimore desk that turned out to be a fake. I remember getting the letter. It was just the time when there was some crisis going on--I've forgotten exactly what it was--but I thought: How could he really be worried about this? But I saw a butler come in with the letter on a little silver plate. I knew, I just had an inkling, it was something from the president's office. It was typed up very neatly, and there were about eight questions. The woman who had given the desk was a Mrs. Maurice Noun of Des Moines, Iowa. The president started off by saying, "I don't believe that under the circumstances Mrs. Noun was treated fairly."

What had happened was that when Maxine Cheshire was doing this series of articles, one just appeared. We had perhaps on Monday or Tuesday decided that Mrs. Noun's desk wasn't any good, and we would replace it when we could. We hadn't contacted her. That afternoon I kept getting calls from the editor of *The Des Moines Register* asking about the Green Room desk. On the very next morning a big headline in the paper-- "Green Room Desk, Twenty-Five Thousand Dollar Fake." The first question was, of course, that he didn't feel that she had been treated fairly. Then there was a series of questions. "When was Mrs. Kennedy first informed?" "When did you make the decision about the desk?" "When did you contact Maxine Cheshire?" It had taken him a great deal of time to write it.

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I sat down and I was a little bit mad at it because of the whole business. I wrote back a series of answers in five different sections that I felt should be covered. The whole thing was

just a very good example of the press and of what must have been some kind of leak at the White House about what was going on. We hadn't been able to contact her. We were simply going to.... She had received a \$25 thousand dollar tax deduction for it. We had decided that the best thing to do under the circumstances would be just perhaps to move the desk upstairs. Mrs. Kennedy was in Ravallo, Italy, at the time. I sent her a letter. She telegraphed me back and said, "Wait until I get back, and we'll move it upstairs." It was just one of those unfortunate things of the press pushing. As it turned out, then we were just completely honest about it. Mrs. Noun did the very nicest thing she could do. She came and took it back.

GRELE: How do you spell her name?

ELDER: N-o-u-n.

GRELE: N-o-u-n. That's what I thought. Did you have any other contacts with the president?

ELDER: I remember one contact I had with him which was.... I mean I had contacts with him as far as--I felt that he knew pretty much what our office was doing. I would get notes from Mrs. Kennedy saying, "The president wants such and such," and "He's asked me to ask you to do such and such." Our office was right in the house. Since we had come in as something the Kennedys had started and all the staff there was.... Well, I guess it's with any president-- a lot of them were friends of Mrs. Kennedy's, our particular office, we had complete run of the house, so to speak.

I didn't try to go up on the second floor when the Kennedys were there, and they knew it. I mean, if they were gone to Middleburg and we wanted to change a room around, put a new bureau in the president's room, we just did it. I went up with George [George Karitas], and we would just empty everything out of the drawers and put in a new bureau. We were really working right in the house so we saw all the family quite a bit.

GRELE: How interested was he in this project?

ELDER: I think he was very interested in it. I don't think he.... I think he just liked to see the transformation. Then his own office was fixed up with very fine marine paintings which he liked.

GRELE: He never saw it repainted?

ELDER: No, he didn't, and he didn't see the new curtains for the Cabinet Room. But he had chosen them all. I remember in the president's office, Mrs. Kennedy and perhaps the president had always.... We had a number of pier tables that had been given to us, these mirror-backed, marble-topped, column-fronted tables. Mrs. Kennedy sent me a note one day and said, "The president (I'm pretty sure she said the president) and I

would like to have a pier table or something to put in his office that we would like to buy ourselves, so that it would be something to take away and say that it had been used in his office.” I remember we went over and bought one in Baltimore. That was the pier table that was right behind his desk. He was interested in having things in his office--in the whole program.

GRELE: I believe at one time you explained to him what the National Trust was?

ELDER: Yes.

GRELE: Do you remember that day?

ELDER: Yes.

GRELE: Did he understand you, what they were attempting to do?

ELDER: Yes. I remember he came out and made a very good speech and then quoted a little poem of Edna St. Vincent Millay's.

GRELE: There was also, I believe, some fear on the part of Mrs. Kennedy that he would not like the Blue Room. Do you remember any of that?

ELDER: No, I don't remember that. I mean I think....

GRELE: Were there discussions over the staining of the floor?

ELDER: Well, the staining of the floor. I remember them staining it dark. I just don't recall the president having any real objection. Everyone was afraid it would wear off, but....

GRELE: Well it did, didn't it?

ELDER: I'm sure it did.

GRELE: In any endeavor like this there are some people who obviously work more than others. On the committee, other than Mr. DuPont, can you recall who was particularly active?

ELDER: Well, one person I.... One committee we've both left out was the Paintings Committee. Mr. James Fosburgh, who did that recent portrait of the president, was the chairman of the Paintings Committee. He worked extremely hard on that committee. Another member of the Furniture Committee.... I would really say Mr. DuPont and Mr. Gerald Shea were the ones who did the most. Well, no, I take that back. Mrs. Englehard [Jane Englehard] did a great deal, was very interested.

GRELE: I was going to ask you about that.

ELDER: She not only gave all the furniture, I guess, for the president's dining room, the family dining room, but she was very interested. She got Bob Railey, who was an architect, when they remodeled the plaster work in that room. She really contacted him herself. She would come down to Washington in a hurry--she'd come down on jets [laughter]--to be right there and see what was going on. She was very interested and did a lot. I guess of all of ours, Mrs. Wrightsman did a great deal by contacting people, by finding donors for various things.

GRELE: Did you have any special projects all your own when you went in?

ELDER: No, I would say no special ones. We were working on too much at the same time to have them.

GRELE: You also, I believe, went out lecturing.

ELDER: Yes.

GRELE: What was the general gist of your lecture?

ELDER: Well, the general gist of my lecture was usually the architectural history of the building--I mean, the White House and its various remodelings, the series of tastes and decoration over the years, and then what we were trying to do and what had been done and the reason for it.

GRELE: Who did you lecture to?

ELDER: I lectured to absolutely every kind of group imaginable. I guess various historical societies, to, well, museums, just the regular.... I tried to be somewhat choosy because I got so many requests to lecture. But it was usually to historical groups, preservation groups, women's organizations, men's organizations.

GRELE: At one time, I believe, the DAR [Daughters of the American Revolution] was critical of some of the redecoration being done at the White House. Do you recall any of these criticisms?

ELDER: That was right in the beginning of the program when Mrs. Kennedy called them--this is on the records, I'm not sure of the term--something to the equivalent of a bunch of frustrated old women. It got out in the papers, in the press, and it was just the time when they were having their annual convention in town. They were running all over town in their badges and everything. They had always in the past

been received at the White House. I think they wanted to come this time, but that particular time it just wasn't convenient.

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GRELE: And they then made criticisms of the work being done?

ELDER: Yes. A lot of these groups, a number of times I remember, would just not understand that you just couldn't take them when they wanted to come and they just couldn't....

GRELE: Did you have many groups like this, wanting to come in and see things?

ELDER: Yes, not only groups. That was a tremendous problem in our office. It got so that the thrill of showing celebrities around wore pretty thin because there was just an endless number of people who came there who were to get special treatment. It got so that my whole job could be nothing but taking them around.

GRELE: Do you recall any particular congressman or senator who didn't like the way things were being done?

ELDER: No, I would say that I really didn't have much contact with various senators coming because they would always get....

GRELE: How about other bigwigs?

ELDER: Well, I would always take museum people around. I remember taking Mrs. Tito [Jovanka Tito] around, various people like that that would come, usually the wife of anybody being entertained. Well, the State Department would usually come through our office, but it got so that we just couldn't handle all the people.

[SIDE 2]

GRELE: Do you recall finding the Hayes [Rutherford B. Hayes] desk?

ELDER: No, I didn't find it. That had been found, I guess, just before I came. It was being refinished, I guess, and went in the president's office. I did have some words with various people afterwards about it going to the Kennedy Library. I don't know where the desk is now. I complained to Mrs. Englehard and to Bob Railey. I know Mrs. Englehard wrote and tried to prevent the desk from being taken to the Kennedy Library because it did contradict absolutely every policy of what they were trying to do. I believe it was the desk--I'm not exactly sure about this, someone had told me, I should know this--that Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] had used sometime during the war. All credit to both men, I think that is as important as the two years that President Kennedy used it--or three years--and that it should remain in the White House.

GRELE: Was this after the assassination?

ELDER: Yes.

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GRELE: Were you still curator?

ELDER: No, I was in Baltimore, but I heard about the desk being taken. Maybe it has been, but I understand it's in a crate at the Smithsonian for the present time. They wanted it for the library. Jane Englehard particularly was going to write to Mrs. Kennedy or to the Johnsons.

GRELE: When did you leave the White House?

ELDER: I left the White House in November, '63. I was down in South Carolina when the president was.... I had taken a couple of weeks off. I knew I was going to Baltimore and I had gone down there with a friend of mine on vacation. I was in Tryon's Palace when I heard the president had been assassinated.

GRELE: Why did you leave? Why were you planning to leave?

ELDER: Well, the work was pretty much done there, and I was a little bored with all the personalities and people involved. I come from Baltimore, I'd been offered a job at the museum about a year before. It was a question of salary. Not that they pay a tremendous salary, nor was I making a tremendous salary at the White House. But it was a question of making the job, at least on the city ratings and everything, bringing it up to the rating so that I could get paid enough to make it into a department, which it hadn't been before.

GRELE: When you left were there any hard feelings about your leaving?

ELDER: No.

GRELE: What was your first reaction to the news of the assassination?

ELDER: I was just very, very stunned. I remember coming right.... Well, I came back to Washington for about two days, but we started right back. Not that I was coming back there for any reason, except that I just....

GRELE: Did you do anything around the White House those days?

ELDER: No. As a matter of fact, I got back I think the day of the funeral. You know, you just didn't feel like doing much of anything particularly. But you've been

there.

GRELE: In summary, do you feel that the changes were lasting?

ELDER: Were lasting or will be lasting?

GRELE: Will be lasting.

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ELDER: Yes, I think they will. It all depends if they keep the office of the curator in existence. I can't see any reason for change. I can't see any reason--and this might seem so obvious--why it hasn't been done before; I can't see any reason why, if you're buying a sofa, if they need a new sofa.... You can get one that's just as strong made in the eighteenth century as you can buying a modern reproduction. The paintings certainly will survive. The guidebook has made them a record. There's apparently a new--which I guess will only get as far as.... It's being done in the Government Printing Office, but it'll get to the Smithsonian and the Library of Congress. It's a good record now of just what was given, who gave it, what its importance is to the White House and why it's there. So, it's all become so much of a record now that I really think it would be pretty hard to change it.

GRELE: We really didn't discuss the paintings. Do you feel that the paintings fit with the White House?

ELDER: Yes, I do. I personally don't think that the Monet made much sense at the time and being in the Green Room.

GRELE: Was that...?

ELDER: That was the one that was given in memory of the president, but that's not that important. The overall painting collection.... The paintings there of the presidents were just really "dogs" so to speak. They were all nineteenth century copies of earlier paintings. There'd been nothing there. The other paintings--I wouldn't say that they're a superb collection. They're a lot better by this time. A lot of the good portraits of the presidents and famous statesmen are already in museums. But they have enough to be a great improvement over what had been there and to be perfectly acceptable in period, in style, with the rooms that they're in.

GRELE: In summary, what were the roles of the president and Mrs. Kennedy in the whole project?

ELDER: Well, I'd say the role of Mrs. Kennedy was that it was her idea. She had a very active role and knowing exactly what was going on at all times. Certainly a great deal of it is her own taste and judgment mixed with that of the committees

and the curator's office and all the other people that helped.

And that of the president was, I think, an interest that kind of came through his interest in history, and then through the people who had lived there. I think things had meaning for him more in that respect than they would as a fine piece of furniture. I'd say his role, too--of the both of them--being so interested that it was possible to do what was done in such short time with the full cooperation of everybody around there and certain inconvenience to them; moving of furniture, noise. Every time the president wanted to get on the elevator a chair sitting in there and he'd have to wait or something--just an interest and tolerance with the whole works.

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GRELE: My last question is a question that an historian rather than a curator is interested in. Do you feel that their tendency to concentrate on the eighteenth century reflected any kind of general attitude they may have held towards themselves and society?

ELDER: No, not in any individual, personal way of the Kennedys. I think we all look back to the eighteenth century in this country, not.... Well, we all look back to it as, in taste, the age of enlightenment and the well-rounded man, et cetera. I think in this country it's the period of Jefferson, Washington, and Adams, and....

GRELE: This is what I was trying to put together here. The president's obvious interest in men of the American enlightenment, even John Quincy Adams, and the taste of his wife in terms of eighteenth century....

ELDER: Well, I just think it happened to work out that way because of the building and because it's probably our finest period of American furniture, decorative arts. And they just went together.

GRELE: Can you think of anything we've missed?

ELDER: No, I'm amazed that we covered as much as we did.

GRELE: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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