

Wilma Holness Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 05/1967
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Holness was a member of the White House household staff throughout multiple administrations. In this interview Holness discusses her job at the White House; interactions with and impressions of John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis; the Kennedy family moving into the White House; traveling with presidential families; interacting with the Kennedy children; and learning of President Kennedy's death, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Wilma Holness

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Oral History Interview

with

WILMA HOLNESS

May, 1967
Washington, D.C.

By Nancy Tuckerman
and Pamela Turnure

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TURNURE: This is an interview with Wilma Holness, who has been at the White House, how long is it Wilma?

HOLNESS: Twenty-two years.

TURNURE: Twenty-two years, and can you tell us something about your job there?

HOLNESS: Well, I used to take care of the foreign visitors that go and come, but during the [Dwight D.] Eisenhower administration they'd go to the Blair House, so that's my job. I usually take care of all the guests and the first family, their personal needs, what I could do for them to aid them along.

TUCKERMAN: Do you live in the White House?

HOLNESS: No, I don't. I have my own home.

TURNURE: Can you recall the first time that you met the Kennedys after they'd moved into the House?

HOLNESS: Oh yes. I was one of the first ones that they, Mrs. [Jacqueline Bouvier] Kennedy met. It was on the cold day of inauguration, and she came from the Capitol, and she came to the White House. And I was one of the first ones to meet her. Mr. (J.B.) West introduced me to her, and she took a nap. And then when he came in about 5 o'clock in the afternoon, he asked me to show him around the rooms. So we walked around and had quite a chat.

TURNURE: Oh, did you? And how did he impress you at the time?

HOLNESS: Oh, he impressed me as one of the nicest persons I've ever known.

TURNURE: And he was very interested in all of the rooms and the history of them and who, and how they were used?

HOLNESS: Oh, yes, he was very. . . . Well, he didn't have much time, said he would rest, and then the next morning he was over with former President (Harry S.) Truman. Of course, Mr. Truman, as always, he was glad to see me. So the president, he was quite happy that he had brought him over.

TURNURE: Oh, that was very nice.

TUCKERMAN: Were the children there then?

HOLNESS: No, the children didn't come until two weeks later. They stayed in Palm Beach and then came up.

TURNURE: But there was quite a bit of time spent getting settled in the family quarters. Where did the Kennedys actually live?

HOLNESS: Well, the president, he occupied the Lincoln Room, and Mrs. Kennedy, she stayed in the Queen's Room.

TURNURE: And then work was going on in the other end in their sitting room and their eventual rooms?

HOLNESS: Yes.

TURNURE: Was that very hard on the staff then, when they were painting and working and trying to keep the family, help make them comfortable?

HOLNESS: Oh no, not unusually, because there's always something going on. At the time, most of the time we spent up in Glen Ora because Mrs. Kennedy, you know, at that time was somewhat convalescing, and she stayed up there, you know, during that time.

TUCKERMAN: And you would go with her to Glen Ora?

HOLNESS: Yes, I was with her up there. The first time it was a deep snow.

TURNURE: Did you like working out in the country? Were you used to going off on trips with the presidential families and working outside of the White House?

HOLNESS: Oh, yes. I had been accustomed ever since back in the [Franklin D.] Roosevelt days when we used to go to Hyde Park and different places. So it was nothing strange so far as I was concerned. I didn't travel with the Eisenhowers.

TUCKERMAN: But you always went with Mrs. Kennedy when she went away?

HOLNESS: Oh, yes. I was always with her when she was away. The girl that used to relieve me, she was taken ill about eight months later. So there was no one left but me to go.

TURNURE: Yes. And was she easy to work for? Was she, can you describe what. . . .

HOLNESS: Well, to me she was one of the nicest ladies that I've ever cared for and easy to take care of. The others were nice, too, but to me Mrs. Kennedy was always so nice, and she was appreciative. And especially the president, he was very nice, yes, yes.

TURNURE: After the children came to the White House, did you spend a lot of time with them? Did you help specifically take care of them when Miss (Maude) Shaw was away or

HOLNESS: Only when we were out from the White House. That's the only time I would care for them. But when they were in the White House, I didn't care for them very much.

TURNURE: Because you were busy with other things and they had Miss Shaw.

HOLNESS: Yes, oh, yes.

TUCKERMAN: But did you see quite a bit of them?

HOLNESS: Oh, my goodness, yes.

TURNURE: Do you remember any particular stories or things that John [F. Kennedy, Jr.] might have said?

HOLNESS: Well, no, I remember not John but Caroline[Kennedy]. We were up in Glen Ora one weekend, and the cows were making a lot of noise, and she was up, oh, two or three times during the night. So once she said, "Those cows are driving me crazy." [Laughter]

And John and I, we used to play peek-a-boo, you know. In the mornings, he'd get up early, 5 o'clock, and I'd say, "You peek-a-boo and go back to sleep." [Laughter] So we traveled a lot when I was. . . .

TURNURE: Did their father have a chance to see them?

HOLNESS: Oh, yes. When we were away, he had more of a chance to see them and visit them because we used to always see to that, you know. In the mornings Caroline would always go in, and then before John was walking, he would start to crawling, you know. He did see them a lot when we were out of town. And like when we'd be in Palm Beach, they'd enjoy swimming and things like that together. I mean that's the times I noticed that he would see them most.

TURNURE: And did you notice, did he play games with them or make up stories?

HOLNESS: Well, no, I don't remember many stories. He was pretty rough, you know, playful, like tumbling and things like that.

TURNURE: Yes. Like tumbling on the lawn.

HOLNESS: Yes, Yes, yes.

TURNURE: And of course with John being such a sturdy boy, he liked wrestling with him.

HOLNESS: Oh, yes.

TURNURE: Let's see, this is a little more difficult, but one of the things that we're interested in knowing about is where you were at the time of the president's death?

HOLNESS: At the time of the president's death, I was in the Hecht Company buying some venetian blinds. And the lady said that the president was shot, and then I walked all the way from Hecht Company to the White House and I stayed on duty until that Sunday afternoon before I left again.

TURNURE: But you wouldn't have been on duty that day normally, but you decided that you should go there?

HOLNESS: Oh yes, yes, I came directly, walked all the way from the Hecht Company. I was off because we were supposed to go to Atoka that Sunday when they came back from Texas.

TURNURE: So you would have been off and then gone down to Virginia to be there?

HOLNESS: That's right.

TURNURE: And then you were there throughout that weekend until Sunday night?

HOLNESS: Oh no. We didn't make the trip because. . . .

TURNURE: No. I mean at the White House.

HOLNESS: Oh, yes, yes.

TURNURE: You were there when Mrs. Kennedy came back.

HOLNESS: Oh, yes I was here.

TUCKERMAN: Were there members of the family that came to stay?

HOLNESS: Well, Mrs. Stephen Smith, she came in, and later on in the night Mrs. (Peter) Lawford, she and her daughter Sydney, they came in. But I stayed up all night; I didn't go to sleep at all. I stayed up until she got back which was about 4:30 in the morning when she got back to the White House. And Mr. Robert Kennedy was with her.

TUCKERMAN: Then you never went to bed that night?

HOLNESS: No, not at all.

TUCKERMAN: That was Friday night.

HOLNESS: Friday night, yes.

TURNURE: And then did you help after that? Did you help Mrs. Kennedy when she was packing to move?

HOLNESS: Oh yes, yes. I did. Yes.

TURNURE: That must have been a very difficult time. I know that so many people have told us how thoughtful she was to the staff and to make sure that she saw everybody.

HOLNESS: Oh, yes, she was very thoughtful. All the period that I worked with her, she was most thoughtful, I thought.

TUCKERMAN: Do you have anything else that you'd like to add or any particular thoughts that we haven't suggested or covered.

HOLNESS: No, I, well. . . .

TURNURE: You were telling me before rather a nice story about your brother-in-law who works in New York. You might tell that.

HOLNESS: I was only saying that I was to New York on occasions and I did have a chance to call. And my brother-in-law drives a taxi in Manhattan, and he asked Mrs. Kennedy, she happened to be a passenger, and he asked her if she was Mrs. Kennedy, and she said yes. He asked her did she know me, and

she said, "Oh yes, I certainly do." And he was telling her that I was up there, and she was telling him when I returned to New York to be sure to call her and come to see her.

TURNURE: Oh, isn't that nice?

HOLNESS: Yes.

TUCKERMAN: Was that recently?

HOLNESS: That was last September, yes.

TUCKERMAN: Isn't that a coincidence?

HOLNESS: Yes, that is. It was very nice.