

Interview with **Willie Bolden**

Date: October 27, 1988

Interviewer: Jacqueline Shearer

Camera Rolls: 4029

Sound Rolls: 411

Team: D

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

**Preferred Citation**

Interview with Willie Bolden, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 27, 1988 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

**Note:** These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in *bold italics* was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #4029]

[sound roll #411]

00:00:11:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera roll forty, twenty-nine. Take...timecode forty—fourteen, twenty-nine. Sound four, one, one.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Jackie.

00:00:25:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, let's get back to 1974. Maynard Jackson is inaugurated as first Black mayor of Atlanta. What were the Black communities' expectations of him?

00:00:36:00

Willie Bolden:

The Black community expectations of Maynard, in my opinion, was very high. And very high for several reasons. One reason is that Maynard had served before becoming mayor as vice mayor for four years. And during that period of time, Maynard was very supportive of the Black community, he was supportive of the Black issues and concerns. Maynard Jackson pretty much was responsible for the deletion of White and colored signs over water fountains in the city of Atlanta. One specific place I'm, I'm very familiar with is the 14th Street water department where, as vice mayor, Maynard went out there like he did many work installations and he saw this White-colored water sign, and he saw where Whites were on one side changing clothes and Blacks on the other and he said, I'm gonna come back in a week, and when I come back I want all this water to be one color, either all White or all colored, and I want these walls torn down, and I want to have one dressing room for everybody. And, of course, I need not say when he went back, that was done. So, Maynard was very supportive. Maynard was supportive of the workers in city government. We know that prior to Maynard going in as vice mayor, you got a promotion based on who you knew, and you had to know somebody in the Moose Club. Well, hell, Blacks didn't know anybody in the Moose Club 'cause they weren't affiliated with the Moose Club or, or the Shriners, and these were the people who got promotions and the best jobs. And Maynard, when he went in as vice mayor, sort of helped clean that up to give everybody a fair shot at promotional positions. So the Black community was very supportive of Maynard. When Maynard ran for mayor, AFSCME union, which I worked for, for about five and a half years, not only supported Maynard monetarily, but we supported him physically. We were out in the streets, knocking on doors, passing out literature, making telephone calls, carrying voters to the polls, because we believed that Maynard stood for what we stood for, and for that we wanted to show him our appreciation, so we got out and worked very hard for Maynard. So, the expectations were high, and, and, and for the most part I would say that Maynard lived up to that expectation. He made some mistakes, but then who don't? But for the most part we looked upon Maynard very favorably. We had high expectations, and in our opinion he lived up to that, to that realization.

00:03:41:00

Interviewer:

OK, thank you. Cut.

[cut]

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Whoops, sec-second sticks, please.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Second sticks.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Hit it.

[slate]

00:03:50:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, Jackie.

00:03:53:00

Interviewer:

Was it a hard decision to strike a Black mayor?

00:03:57:00

Willie Bolden:

It was a hard decision to strike Maynard, who was Black. And it was hard for many of the reasons I just mentioned. We knew that Maynard was supportive, or we felt that he was. Personally, I had no problem about where Maynard's heart was. Maynard's background, his training, his upbringing all spoke for itself. Maynard came from a activist family. His grandfather, John Wesley Dobbs, was very influential in this community. So it was hard to tell our folk, look, the only other choice we have is to strike. But I think it must be pointed out that we didn't strike Maynard, Black mayor, we struck a system, which Maynard just happened to be the head of. I believe today, and I think even Maynard believe today that one of the reasons we had to strike was because the people around him was not giving him much information, of the proper kinds of information. I remember very distinctly one night we set up all night long at the 14th Street...not the 14th Street, front end motor—

00:05:31:00

Interviewer:

I'm gonna cut you off here because—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Cut?

Interviewer:

Yes, cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Running and speed.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:05:40:00

Crewmember:

OK, Jackie.

00:05:42:00

Interviewer:

Was it difficult for the union to carry signs saying, "Maynard's Word is Garbage"?

00:05:47:00

Willie Bolden:

It, it was difficult. It was difficult because we really believed Maynard heart was in the right place. However, we had no other choice. When a garbage worker goes to the store to buy a loaf of bread, he has to pay the same amount that the mayor has to pay, the city council have to pay, any department head has to pay. So, what we were saying to Maynard and to the city fathers, look, our folks are the lowest on the totem pole. When we pull into a gas sa-station, they don't say because you work for the city government you pay X number of dollars for gas. Whatever the price of gas, that's what you pay. So, our position was, Maynard, we love you, we believe your heart is in your right place, but you gonna have to get your folk and you gonna make them do what is right. And we made up in our minds, even though we had a lot of respect for Maynard, that we were not gonna exchange a White slave master for a Black slave master. And that's not to say that we believed Maynard was trying to be a Black

slave, slave master, but what we were sending...the message we were sending to him was we were not gonna do that. And whatever it took to get for our people, what they rightfully deserved, we were gonna do that, including a strike.

00:07:13:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

And speed.

00:07:16:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:07:19:00

Interviewer:

You told me about the work conditions that your men faced. Can you give me the same description of what you found when you went down to the yards at 5:30 in the morning?

00:07:28:00

Willie Bolden:

Yeah, I would get up at 5:30 in the morning and go down to Maddox Park Sanitation Yard. And I used to wonder before I visited the worksite, how in the world could someone, at six o'clock in the morning, just turn a bottle of liquor up to his mouth and just drink it, at six o'clock in the morning. I went down to Maddox Park Sanitation Yard and, and I visited the trucks, I just inspected them. Could you imagine in June with the temperature between ninety-eight and a hundred, maggots hanging off the walls, the back where they hold on to the truck as they ride, maggots all on the post? The cans that they used during that time, now they have the dumpster dump...I mean the rollers, they just roll 'em up there and they dump 'em, but back then they had to walk up steep hills and get the garbage and then put it on their shoulders, and maggots all over the, the, the cans. Now, I realize that, that somebody's gotta do that work, but at the same time [blower whirs]—

[blower whirs]

00:08:46:00

Interviewer:

Excuse me, I—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Excuse me. That blower is in there—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:08:55:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, Jackie.

00:08:56:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, let's pick up where we left off.

00:09:00:00

Willie Bolden:

As I said earlier, I truly believe that Maynard heart was in the right place. But the truth of the matter is, Maynard was not delivering. OK? The only tool that a union might have to get whatever for its workers is, one, sitting around the table, negotiating. And we did that, day in, day out. The only other tool we have is to strike. Now, it doesn't have anything to do with whether or not the mayor is Black, White, blue, green, yellow, polka-dot. If we can't get what we want for our people around the table, then you strike. And that's what we did. *We didn't strike Maynard because he was Black. We struck him because our folk were picking up garbage, working among maggots, and we felt that they needed to get paid for doing that. Seven, eight, nine thousand dollars a year, in our opinion, was not enough.*

00:10:11:00

Interviewer:

Thank you.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Keep going? You have another question?

Interviewer:

Cut. No.

Camera Crew Member #2:

K. All—

[cut]

00:10:16:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it, please.

Willie Bolden:

Yeah.

[slate]

00:10:20:00

Interviewer:

So, what was that you were saying about Emma Darnell?

00:10:22:00

Willie Bolden:

I said, Emma Darnell was and still is a very excellent administrator. She is a dynamic communicator. She's aggressive. And on top of that, she's Black, she's a female. And Maynard gave her the job to see to it that those persons who wanted contracts from the

City of Atlanta come up with the agreed upon requirement of Black minorities. *And the White power structure downtown couldn't deal with Emma, because not only was she Black and a female, but she was smart and she was a very excellent communicator. So, she would [papers rustle] look at the contract and if it didn't have the appropriate amount of minority participation, she said, Take that back. Get it right. They couldn't deal with that. Not a Black female.* And that ultimately [blower whirs] got her terminated, but she—

[rollout on camera]

[wild sound]

Willie Bolden:

—did her job, and she did it very, very, very well.

00:11:31:00

Interviewer:

OK, that's a cut. That's a cut. [laughs]

Camera Crew Member #2:

That's cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:11:36:00

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