

Interview with **Walter Huntley**

Date: October 27, 1988

Interviewer: Jacqueline Shearer

Camera Rolls: 4043

Sound Rolls: 417

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

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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 #4043]

[sound roll #417]

00:00:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:00:23:00

Interviewer:

OK, Walter, why don't you tell me about the trek of young professionals coming to the mecca of Atlanta.

00:00:28:00

Walter Huntley:

OK. *I came to Atlanta in the summer of 1972.* I was just finishing up a, a Master's Degree in Urban Studies, and I'll never forget my professor, Dr. Earl Lewis at Trinity University in San Antonio said, Why do you want to do your internship in Atlanta? *And I had read Ebony magazine, and seeing where it was the Black Mecca, and, and there were saying that if you were Black and had a college degree, this was the best place in the world to live.* And it was

very intriguing to me. And I just wanted to see what it was like. And so, I packed everything up in my car and drove from San Antonio to Atlanta, and got here in that summer. And there were all sorts of people from all over the country who I'd met. And we'd just gotten out of graduate school or wherever, and they had heard about Atlanta. And it was kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy of a lot of very creative and idealistic people were coming to the city.

00:01:27:00

Interviewer:

Then speak about how you came to work for Maynard Jackson's administration. What drew you to it?

00:01:33:00

Walter Huntley:

Basically, I was working for an urban research organization called Research Atlanta and Maynard was vice-mayor at the time, and he was interested in alternative revenue sources. Where would the city be with regard to its finances in the next ten or fifteen years? And, I was working in the area of taxation and finance at the time and was the one that was to do the briefing session with him. So, we came in and we started talking and I briefed him on where things were going. And he asked me, you know, where was I from, and I told him I was from Texas. And then he said, Well, look, I'd like for you to, to stay in Atlanta. And at that time, I'd only been in the city about a year and a half, and he seemed very sincere. I didn't know that much about politics. I'd been doing mostly empirical research. And I guess within two weeks, someone called and said the vice-mayor's thinking about running for mayor, and he would like for you to work in his campaign on his issues group as—in the area of taxation and finance. And, I said, Great, how much does it pay? And they said, Nothing. So, I figured it would behoove me to, to get a little bit more involved in the political process and understand what was going on. And he seemed to be very dynamic. And so that's how I started working for the mayor. He won. I made the right decision. And started out as a special assistant in 1974, I think. He took office in January, and I began, ah, working for him in March of '74.

00:03:12:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Rolling and speed.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:03:19:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:03:20:00

Interviewer:

So why don't you tell me about change in leadership that went on in '74.

00:03:27:00

Walter Huntley:

Well, with regard to the, the leadership change in 1974, I guess the, the best thing to, to call it, would be to say that it was very, very different. It was new. It was not business as, as usual. And the reason I say that, people always ask, what was the difference between the previous administration and the Jackson administration? And it was radical, unprecedented change for several reasons. One, was that we had a new city charter that mandated that the new mayor change the basic governmental structure. We went from a weak mayor form of government to a strong mayor form of government. And that in and of itself was major. We hadn't had a new city charter in I think, somewhere around a hundred years. So that, just the organizational change, caused people to have tremendous expectations. In addition to that, as I try to think back over where we were during that time, I think that the, eight of the eighteen city council members were new to their position. The city council president that was getting ready to come into office was new to his position. The council was half Black and half White almost, which had dynamics to it. In addition, the mayor was new to his position. And then you overlay that with the, the issue of race. So, you can see that the, the elements of change were in the air. And in addition, the, the governmental structure calls for the separation of weak and, well, excuse me, executive and legislative branch of government, it called for a strong executive. Most of Atlanta's mayors had been strong leaders but now, we were having a form of government that called for the chief executive to really take charge and set the tone for government.

00:05:30:00

Interviewer:

Good. Thank you. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:05:37:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:05:39:00

Interviewer:

Can you describe the change in Black attitudes towards city government?

00:05:43:00

Walter Huntley:

OK. I think the, when Maynard took office, the, the level of expectation in the Black community, not only in Atlanta, but all over the country, was extremely high. I remember getting calls in from people from back home saying, What's it like? And one of the things that I remember going into city government and finding out that we were just besieged by calls. Everyone wanted to embrace the first Black mayor of a major Southern city. And we were getting anywhere from three to four hundred calls a day, and I remember people just saying, Here, Walt, here are thirty calls we want you to return. Tell them that we're sorry that the mayor cannot speak with you at this time, but you are calling to see if there was something that you could do to help them out. So that's what we literally had to do when we first took office for the first six months. After that, we had to begin to figure out a way to include more people. Maynard ran on a, a platform of the politics of inclusion and he wanted

to open up the government to Blacks, to women, to younger people. And one of the things that we devised which I, I thought was really great, was the people's day. Whereby anybody who, who wanted to, could come in and meet with the mayor for five minutes with no appointment. And he had all of his commissioners and bureau directors there. And I'll never forget, there was this one woman who came in. We would have anywhere from hundreds of people that would be there waiting to see the mayor all day. But this one elderly, Black woman came in, and she walked in, in slowly and sat down. And the mayor looked at her and he said, How are you? She said, I'm doing fine. He said, Can I help you? She said, Yes. And he said, Well, what is it that I can do for you? And she said, Well, I just wanted to see what it would be like to see a Black man sitting in this chair. And so, the mayor smiled very broadly, and said, Well, how am I doing? And she said, You're doing just fine. And I think that kind of embodied the, the way people felt. There were a lot of governmental employees that were Black who had never been on the second floor of City Hall. And it was a very, very proud feeling that the, not only the governmental workers but Black people in general, not only in the South and in Atlanta, but all over the country felt in terms of pride for what Maynard had achieved.

00:08:18:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

Interviewer:

That was fa—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it here.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Thank you. Jackie, new question?

Interviewer:

Yes.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, I'll go slightly wider.

Interviewer:

Okey-doke. That's perfect.

00:08:29:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hm-hmm.

00:08:31:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, so I'd like you to set up what the, this project of the airport was about and what the expectations were on it.

00:08:40:00

Walter Huntley:

OK. The airport was one of the major, ***the construction of a new airport for the City of Atlanta was one of the major projects if not the major project in the Jackson administration. There were a number of big construction projects between 1976 and 1979 or '80 but this was the crown jewel.*** And the reason was because the airport plays such a major role in Atlanta's overall economy. We have the, one of the busiest airports in the world, and we did at that time. And this was going to be the largest public construction project that had ever been undertaken by the city. And in fact, after it was built, it would be the largest airport in the world. And the magnitude of it was such that it was just very difficult to comprehend. It was about a seven hundred and fifty million dollar project. And, the anxiety, the anticipation was high. And the airlines, the elected officials, the private sector, the federal government was involved. And, it was, it was something that everyone knew that we had to do and there was a lot riding on it, and it had to be done right. And when Maynard indicated that he was going to make sure that Blacks participate in every element of the process from the standpoint of construction architectural services, legal services, the whole gamut, that's when basically the, I guess you would say, the, the whole issue came under tremendous scrutiny, the cost of the magnitude.

00:10:22:00

Interview:

Great. We're rolling out?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes, we are. OK.

Interviewer:

That was great.

Camera Crew Member #2:

That's a rollout on camera roll forty forty-three.

Walter Huntley:

You're a good coach.

Camera Crew Member #1:

We didn't roll out, so you can the gate.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:10:35:00

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