

Interview with **A.G. Gaston**

November 1, 1985

Production Team: C

Camera Rolls: 515-516

Sound Rolls: 1508

Interviewer: James A. DeVinney

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

### Preferred Citation

Interview with A.G. Gaston, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on November 1, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. 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*.

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 515]

[sound roll 1508]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: Rolling.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: OK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: OK, JIM, IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: OK, DR. GASTON, YOU HAVE BEEN A VERY SUCCESSFUL BLACK MAN IN YOUR CAREER, SO THAT WHEN 1963 CAME AROUND, WHY YOU WERE ALREADY QUITE WEALTHY. SO I'M JUST WONDERING HOW, HOW YOU CAME BY YOUR SUCCESS, IF YOU COULD JUST TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THAT.

Gaston: I don't know about wealthy, but I had been around here a long time. Ninety-three years old, you know? And I worked over there at U.S. Steel for \$3.10 a day, so it's a long time before I was wealthy, as you call it.

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INTERVIEWER: WELL, WHAT WAS IT LIKE FOR BLACK PEOPLE IN BIRMINGHAM BEFORE THE 1963 DEMONSTRATIONS? DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT THAT—

Gaston: Pretty tough, pretty tough.

INTERVIEWER: HOW SO?

Gaston: There were, there were no conveniences, public conveniences available to black people, on equal basis. Quite a bit of unemployment. You can understand the segregated job situations. They had jobs for whites and jobs for blacks and so forth. Those were the conditions that many of the black folks came through, and some of them survived, and made a little money.

00:01:14:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU, WHEN YOU LOOKED AROUND AT THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT EXISTED FOR BLACK PEOPLE IN THIS COMMUNITY, DID YOU FEEL SOME SORT OF RESPONSIBILITY BECAUSE YOU HAD BEEN SORT OF FORTUNATE IN MAKING SOME MONEY? DID YOU FEEL AN OBLIGATION TO DO SOMETHING?

Gaston: Well, yes, it was all of us in the same pot. We was, we was self-, self-survival. Wasn't so much as helping myself, it was helping the other fellow so we all could survive. That was my interest in the civil rights movement. It wasn't a selfish movement; it was for all of us. As I say, Arthur Shores did quite a bit of the legal work, but I was fortunate enough to have had a little money and I did the financing, most of it.

00:01:54:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, I'D LIKE TO ASK YOU, IN 1962 THEY STARTED CHANGING THE GOVERNMENT OVER DOWN HERE—

Gaston: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: —SID SMYER WAS A LITTLE BIT EMBARRASSED ABOUT THINGS, AND BEGAN WORKING. WERE YOU INVOLVED IN SOME OF THE PLANS TO CHANGE THE CITY GOVERNMENT?

Gaston: Not directly on it, indirectly. As I say, I provided the funds for the, the civil rights folks who was agitating, and provided facilities for those civil rights activists, such as Andy Young, and those boys who come over here, and with the movement, with, with Martin King.

00:02:29:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, I'M BACKING UP JUST A LITTLE BIT EARLIER, THOUGH, BECAUSE THEY WERE CHANGING THE GOVERNMENT OVER. THERE WAS A COMPETITION BETWEEN—

Gaston: Oh, prior to then, they were, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: —[unintelligible] BULL CONNOR. DID YOU THINK THAT THAT ELECTION, THE OUTCOME OF THAT MIGHT CHANGE BIRMINGHAM?

Gaston: Yeah, I was, I was. I was with David Vann. I supported him in his election. He was, seemed to have been spearheading that movement. I was very active with that group when Vincent Townsend, who was with \_The Birmingham News\_, who was very active. So I—

00:02:58:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW, HOW WERE YOU ACTIVE?

Gaston: Well, I was participating. I was one had a little money and they kind of accepted me in a way. I was a member of the Chamber of Commerce, along with Arthur Shores, back in those days, and naturally I had, I was, had communication with, with the leaders.

00:03:17:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, NOW YOU WERE INVOLVED IN THE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE, THERE WAS ALREADY PLANS TO CHANGE THE CITY GOVERNMENT, BRING IN ALBERT BOUTWELL, GET RID OF BULL CONNOR, AND SOME OF THOSE PEOPLE. DIDN'T YOU THINK THAT CHANGE WAS COMING? DIDN'T YOU THINK THAT MAYBE MARTIN LUTHER KING'S INTERVENTION WAS UNNECESSARY, OR HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT THAT?

Gaston: Well, we didn't, *we didn't anticipate the need for Martin King at that time. This, this Martin King thing came, and all of a sudden*, things sparked off down at Montgomery with this lady that had the bus problem, down there, and then Martin went on over to Atlanta. And we had a fellow named Shuttlesworth that was raising sand around here. And his idea was to, to get into the schools, and of course, it was an organization that we supported, and what is this, I'm trying to think of that organization's, the name of the—Southern Conference, what was the name of it?

INTERVIEWER: ALABAMA OR—

Gaston: Yeah, that was Shuttlesworth's movement, see? And I financed it. Well we, they had no pla-, no place to stay when they started bringing in folks from Atlanta, and Montgomery up here, and that's when I put them up at the motel, down there. They had no money. I didn't participate actively for any of the organizations, but I financed it. And some of the activities

that I didn't approve of, in a way. I was financing the group, but an incident, *they were taking the kids out of school, you know marching. And I thought that was unnecessary. In fact, my idea was the kids, many of them, didn't know what it was all about to start with.* But they were using them, and very effectively. And I got criticized from, from, from them, by some of them. Hosea Williams, that boy is very popular, from Atlanta, now, he was one of the fellows who called me an Uncle Tom, a super Uncle Tom. [laughs] Old Hosea did. But the guys couldn't eat, they had no place to stay and eat, other than me they couldn't do nothing but, you know, 'cause I was feeding them and putting them up down there. And that's the only thing I had. I was with the movement, but my idea of approaching it was somewhat different from some of the folks that, that, that you might call radicals. I was trying to approach it from, and I did it, from a, very effectively. My place on the, on the Chamber there—

[cut]

[wild audio]

Gaston: —got some of the leaders to, to move. They were willing to do something for me that they wouldn't have done for Martin King, or to Shuttlesworth.

00:05:55

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: WE'RE ABOUT TO RUN OUT.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S JUST CHANGE THE ROLL HERE AND WE'LL—

[cut]

[camera roll 516]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: LET ME GET A SLATE HERE. OK, AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: THANK YOU. [pause] OK, JIM, IT'S ALL YOURS.

00:06:09:00

INTERVIEW: OK, LET ME ASK YOU THEN, IF YOU WERE SUPPORTING MARTIN KING AND SOME OF THOSE PEOPLE, AND GIVING THEM SOME FINANCIAL HELP, LETTING THEM USE YOUR MOTEL AND THINGS LIKE THAT, SURELY SOME OF THE PEOPLE IN BIRMINGHAM MUST HAVE BEEN UPSET WITH YOU, DID YOU HAVE CALLS?

Gaston: Yeah, yeah. My house was bombed, the motel was bombed, and but I think what I did helped save the situation from polarizing the whites and the blacks, because I was a kind of moderate between the two. The whites wasn't too happy with me, you know? I had money and I was supporting these radicals over here. So they were giving me hell, and the black folks, they were giving me hell, says I was an Uncle Tom, [laughs] 'cause I was supporting the whites. I was, I was trying to keep the town from—And so, when they started the bombing, I told them at the Chamber of Commerce, Sid Smyer, who was a very prominent man in this town, who had very influential, and I just told Sid, I just slipped up his, his office in the back. I couldn't let the blacks see me having conferences with him. But it was that type of communication that saved the town. Because the blacks was fixing to bomb up the town, that is they were getting dynamites out, and the whites, they were doing the same, and I could see, I'm a property owner, I had, I had selfish interests there, my business was going to be burned up, and everything. So I told Mr. Smyer what was fixing to happen. And they got it over to the white people, that I think saved the situation. I make no compromise. I think I, I'm proud of what I done, [laughs] even if I caught hell on it from both sides. Because today, you can see the climate in Birmingham that probably wouldn't have been here at that time. It was after we changed this thing, then the white and the black began to kinda come to their sense, and this community started going.

00:08:00:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME ASK YOU ABOUT SOME OF THE PEOPLE AT THAT TIME. TELL ME WHAT YOU REMEMBER OF BULL CONNOR?

Gaston: Bull said that I was his best nigger in town. Old Gaston, my good nigger. That was his compliment to me. [laughs] And I thought it was most embarrassing thing I ever saw, but I couldn't really say anything. It was those kind of a situations where the white and blacks couldn't communicate. We had a, we had a white man that announced for some political office here, I remember, and the newspaper took a picture of him shaking hands with a black man on the street, and that in itself caused him to lose the election. The entire thing was so tense, at that time, nobody profited from it.

00:08:44:00

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME ABOUT FRED SHUTTLESWORTH.

Gaston: He was a brave young man. He took the blunt. I got him out of jail many a time. [laughs] He was he was trying to integrate the school. The night that Martin King was in jail over here—when he wrote the letter about the Birmingham jail—Martin was in jail, over here, and Shuttlesworth was, had his, beat all up, and had to come down there bloody and everything. And, and then it was fixing to have a mess in this town. It was at that time I got Arthur to go there and get, get Martin out of jail. Well, the, the group didn't want him to get out of jail, because the longer he was in jail, it would inspire the movement to move. So we got Martin out of jail, and we got Shuttlesworth straightened out, and that saved that situation that night. I believe maybe the next day though is the time that march started. I believe that time they started in the park, out there, where Bull came down there with the hose pipe. But

Shuttlesworth was a, was a leader. He was the one who led the organization that brought King over here from Atlanta.

00:09:57:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT WYATT TEE WALKER? REMEMBER HIM?

Gaston: Yeah, well, yeah, Wyatt, he was with that organization, one of the leaders in there.

00:10:03:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS ART HANES LIKE AS MAYOR? DO YOU REMEMBER?

Gaston: Yeah, [laughs] he was one of those radical mayors. I think it's him and his son was a lawyer. I think he, he wasn't, he was back, he wasn't too much more better [sic], better than Bull Connor back in that day. But things really started changing when Boutwell got in. And it didn't go too far then, but it did turn a little back to center from when, then when David Vann got in there, that's really when it started going on the right track.

00:10:43:00

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME ABOUT DAVID VANN.

Gaston: He was a good man, he just made a mistake. I had lunch with him yesterday. [coughs] He was a, made a good mayor, but he made one mis- [coughs], one [coughs], one mistake. They had a police that shot a black girl here, and Vince Townsend and I were in Operation New Birmingham. David Vann was trying to do the right thing and he appointed a committee. It was a decision for him to make, he appointed this committee, [laughs] and this committee, they came up with, said with the situation, that, that they didn't accept, and that, that made him very unpopular. That's when Richard Arrington came in leading the group that he had, and, and he probably from, and Richard Arrington today is doing a doggone good job. He's very popular in this community.

00:11:32:00

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN THEY BLEW UP THE 16TH STREET CHURCH?

Gaston: Yeah.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: HANG ON TWO SECONDS HERE. MOVE JUST A LITTLE BIT HERE. LET ME—WE'RE STILL ROLLING.

INTERVIEWER: WE'RE ALMOST DONE HERE.

Gaston: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: LET'S RUN OUT THIS FILM.

Gaston: This be all—

00:11:43:00

INTERVIEWER: REMEMBER WHEN THEY BLEW UP THE 16TH STREET CHURCH?

Gaston: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME ABOUT IT. WHERE WERE YOU?

Gaston: Well, well that's, that was when I, the time that the black was just about ready to do some fighting back. 'Cause they had bombs, they had dynamite, stuff stored up around, some of it was around our place there. And I could see, with dynamite in the hands of blacks who were very upset at that, that period, and the, and the Klan, who was prepared for those two coming together. And I was, I was afraid then to think, well, it was that time that they wanted to get the, the president to send the, the officers—what do you call them? The?

00:12:33:00

INTERVIEWER: MARSHALLS?

Gaston: Hm? Marshals. The marshals. And Martin King and I, we had a committee, went to see the president. I, I was opposed. I was on the Chamber, the Chamber really didn't want the marshals, and I agreed with them. We didn't want to do the outside, we thought we could do it ourselves. And so I, I prevailed on King and them to not to insist on Kennedy not to have the marshals in here. We sat in the office, in, with the president, I remember so very well. Reverend, Reverend Ware, who was one of us, into the Oval Office, [laughs] he had to go in the toilet, you know? [laughs] That Oval Office, I, it was quite interesting. But when we got through with the president, and the president was pretty upset, he was breathing fire, he said now don't you go out there and tell the press out there that I wouldn't send in the—what do you call them?

00:13:35:00

INTERVIEWER: MARSHALS.

Gaston: The marshals, there. He said, y'all didn't ask for them. I said, yeah, we didn't. But then, we, we, we met over there at the Hilton Hotel and King and them had to prevail on me. I wasn't going over there unless we agreed to not to call for the officers, for the marshals. So we agreed not to call for the officers, and we didn't. And, but they sent a committee. I mean, the president sent two, a retired Army officer, and whoever, y'all ought to know who it was. They came down, and from then on, just started to get the thing together.

00:14:08:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ARE THE REAL ISSUES AT THAT TIME?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: I GOT A HUNDRED FEET. I WONDER—

Gaston: The real issue was getting integration in the, in the, in the restrooms of the city, fitting on clothes in the stores, and that type of stuff.

00:14:21:00

INTERVIEWER: WELL THERE WAS A LOT OF DISCUSSION AND DEBATE ABOUT THE USE OF NON-VIOLENCE TO COMBAT THE VIOLENCE. THERE WAS A LOT OF VIOLENCE IN BIRMINGHAM, AND YET MARTIN WAS TALKING ABOUT USING NON-VIOLENT METHODS. DID YOU APPROVE OF THAT?

Gaston: Now me, myself, I couldn't do it, so I don't get in it. But he succeeded, and I agree with every bit of the world, he succeeded with it and he got results from it. And I'm well prepared to give him all the credit and honor for it. But in the outer hall in our building down there, I was sitting in the audience, when King up there making a speech and some young, obnoxious fellow jumped up on the platform and attacked him. And he wouldn't even let us, and I went to call the police and King stopped me. [laughs] He the one they would have wanted arrested, see? And they were planning to, it was in a black audience, can you imagine? And they would have tore him up. King wouldn't let them. And then, the police came anyway, and King wouldn't even press charges against him.

00:15:15:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT'S YOUR OUTSTANDING MEMORY DURING THAT TIME?

Gaston: Well, that was it. That, it was there, to *stand up on my building looking down at Bull Connor and them shooting water in the park right cross from my office there, in that park. I guess that's the most outstanding thing in my mind right now.*

00:15:32:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN YOU SAW THAT?

Gaston:

*I just couldn't imagine what could have happened.* I could see my building, bombing up, and everything, I just couldn't know what was going to happen. That, plus that, that, that bombing of that, that, that church down there, killing those kids. Those will always stay in my mind. But I can reflect back on it now and see what has happened as a community that we're living in. See the leadership that Richard Arrington has given this town, and the... I can see the relief that has come to many white people, even white businesses that are better off



today, because instead of having two toilets, they have only one toilet now. So they save money. [laughs] So the whole thing worked all right. I can see the transit system, where it, they had to have the black folks on the back of the thing, now the black folks is running the thing. You know, everybody's happy on it. So, I've been, seen it all. And profited from it.

00:16:37:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, THANK YOU VERY MUCH, DR. GASTON—

Gaston: Yeah.

[cut]

[end interview]

00:16:41:00

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