INTERVIEW I

DATE: November 10, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: MARY LASKER (Mrs. Albert D. Lasker)

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

PLACE: Mrs. Lasker's residence, New York City

Tape 1 of 1

F: Mrs. Lasker, let's start by talking a little bit about how you first became interested in health programs and in beautification, things which you are associated with--desalination of water, the whole myriad.

L: I'm interested in health programs because as a child I had poor health--

F: This is in Wisconsin?

L: In Wisconsin. At one time I was in the midst of a flu epidemic, and I saw that nobody knew what to do for anybody who was deathly sick around me. And I decided, "If I ever grow up and have any money, I'm going to do something about medical research to find out whether or not we can do something to prevent that kind of affliction that I see around me." Well, we haven't got that answered yet, but we have a lot of other problems that are better taken care of.

F: You came east to Radcliffe, did you never go back to Wisconsin?

L: I never went back to Wisconsin. I went to the University of Wisconsin for a year and a half. Then I went to Radcliffe and graduated from Radcliffe. Then I went a term to Oxford after that, which was extremely enjoyable.

F: Didn't you feel sort of as if you were in a segregated world at Oxford?

L: Yes. Did you ever go to Oxford?

F: No, I never did.

L: You were very sheltered. You feel extremely sheltered. Even London is a long way away.

F: And primarily a man's world, I guess.

L: Yes. But there were girl students there. I was a graduate student. I visited some classes and had a tutor. I read English literature. I wasn't looking for credits, so I could do what I wanted.

F: Then did you come back to New York?

L: I came back to New York. I was interested in the history of fine arts at Radcliffe, so I wanted to get a job in the art world. And I did get a job in the Rinehardt Galleries. And later on I married Mr. Rinehardt.

F: And stayed with some aspects of the arts ever since.

L: Yes.

F: When did you begin to turn to beautification?

L: My mother was always very interested in outdoor plantings, in gardens, in public parks, and had started two public parks in Watertown, Wisconsin, where we lived. Her interest and preoccupation with this, I think, just rubbed off on me. Besides that, I'm very visual minded, so that any natural beauty and landscape or man-made beauty and landscape gives me great pleasure--as do paintings or sculpture. Any form of visual beauty gives me great pleasure.

F: What about water, which is a long ways off from New York and Wisconsin both in the sense of knowing there's a need for desalting.

L: You mean desalting of water?

F: Yes.

L: I'm interested in people's well-being, and I know that water makes riches because it makes it possible for people to grow more on land and live in a higher standard of living. I often flew over Arizona and New Mexico. I had a ranch in Arizona at one time. It was near Prescott, Arizona, really--not too far. And the whole issue was whether or not we had water and whether the river was running and whether or not our neighbors had stolen too much water from us. I realized when I flew over Arizona and New Mexico that they'd be very much richer states if they had bigger water supplies--and the same with many areas of Texas.

F: Right. You and President Johnson had no trouble communicating on that score.

L: No, not at all.

F: Where did you first become acquainted with President Johnson?

L: I supported him first in 1948 when he was running for the Senate, because Theo Davis, who is a friend of his in Austin and was distantly related to my husband, asked us to support him. And I did. And I think I met him once or twice in the fifties. But I never really knew him until about the end of 1958 when I had organized a small committee, which we called Committee for Research and Development of the Free World--it had some fancy name like that.

F: What were you trying to do?

L: We were going to try to see that the free world got more education, desalinization, health--a variety of things. I was interested in the efforts of Paul Hoffman in the United Nations Development Fund. It was really an effort to put our relations with the rest of the world in perspective and

see what practical things could be done. One of them was to distribute our food more--our surplus food more equitably.

F: Was this primarily a New York committee, or was it nationally based?

L: It was a New York committee.

F: How did you come to the attention of President Johnson--or Senator Johnson, I should say?

L: David Lloyd was a director of the committee, and he had been an administrative assistant of President Truman's. He was a highly intelligent person. You may remember him, I don't know. He and I both felt that Eisenhower was supplying no new ideas at all in the conduct of American affairs, either domestically or from a foreign relations point of view.

F: Sort of characterized by his Interior policy which had the slogan "No new starts."

L: That's right--no new starts of any kind. And we thought there should be new starts. So David Lloyd wrote a very, very good speech, which we wanted Senator Johnson to give as the majority leader, which would be a sort of Democratic State of the Union speech urging a whole series of new things. I hope I have a copy of that here. A friend of mine, Florence Mahoney, and I were great friends with Clark Clifford, who was also a great friend of Senator Johnson's, as you well know. Clark Clifford said that he would get us an appointment to see him, which indeed he did.

We waited with Clark for about two hours while Johnson received numerous people, including I think a delegation of Mexicans, a great variety of people. Finally we got in, and the then-Senator really gave us his attention. Clark told him what we wanted to do. We wanted him really to express

the leadership of the Democratic Party, and we were willing to loan him some staff, if he needed help, and do anything that we could to help. He said, "You want to help me?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "I accept."

F: There wasn't any indecision on that.

L: No. So then he gave the speech, or at least part of the speech, but not as a State of the Union speech and not, as far as I can recall, in the Senate. He made the speech at wherever was convenient around the country, and it did not have any great impact as it might have had if he had done it--

F: It wasn't really a Democratic White Paper.

L: It wasn't really a Democratic White Paper. However, it put us in touch with him. He then said, well, he would see us from time to time. He said, "I'm very interested in housing for older people. I don't know how to do something about this, but I want to do it, and I know a man who was very effective. His name is Joe McMurray, and I don't know where he is, and I'd like to get hold of him to see if he could work for me a little while, while we did something about this in the Senate."

Well, we got Joe McMurray, and he did indeed work for him and Sparkman because Sparkman was really leading the housing fight. Sparkman and Johnson got a bill for housing older people passed twice over the vetoes of Eisenhower.

Finally the bill was passed, but one day one of the people working for me was in the Senate, and they discovered that there was no money for the bill. There was legislation, but no funds. They finally got Pete Williams to get up on the floor that day and offer an amendment for, I

think, seventy-five million dollars. I think they came out with fifty million dollars--since then they've had substantial funds--for facilities for older people. As you know, there's one in Johnson City.

F: Yes. Was this an oversight on Senator Johnson or Senator Sparkman's part, or did the Appropriations Committee just not come through?

L: I think the Appropriations Committee just didn't--naturally, Eisenhower didn't send up any money from the budget. The budget would never have any money for this, because he had vetoed the bill twice. And, you know, once it gets in Appropriations, the people that pass it legislatively sort of forget the bill because they're on to something next. It can just pass unless somebody's watching, which was good fortune in this case.

F: This seemed at the time to lots of northern liberals who supported it rather bizarre that the impetus for this housing bill came from, one, the Senate Majority Leader, who is from Texas, and, two, from John Sparkman, who is from Alabama. Did that create any special situations for you?

L: Not for me at all. All I did was to provide Joe McMurray, and they did all the work. But then, by chance, somebody else that was working with me heard there was no money appropriated. And, you know, there's always these terrible slips between the legislative side and the Appropriations Committees, and it was just chance that the money finally got put in the bill by the efforts of Ken Birkhead, who was associated with me.

F: Did you have any hand at all in Mr. Johnson's agonizing over whether to offer himself for the presidency in 1960?

L: No. I realized that he was thinking about it, and I didn't think he was taking sufficiently firm steps about it. I realized that in order to win

against Kennedy, who was working so hard, he'd have to do an awful lot of work. But Johnson was afraid of neglecting his job in the Senate, which indeed he would have done.

F: Had you worked with Senator Kennedy at this time?

L: No. I didn't know Senator Kennedy well at all, and I was a friend of Adlai Stevenson's. I was for Stevenson, although Stevenson was not very clearly even for himself, if you'll recall. But I was one of the group of friends that urged that he be nominated. I would have been for Johnson had it not been that I had been for Stevenson in 1952 and in 1956, and that would have been considered a terrible breach of friendship if I hadn't stayed with him.

F: Had you been sure that Johnson was going to offer himself?

L: Had I been sure of what Johnson was going to do? No, not at first. I thought Johnson was magnificent as the majority leader, and the business of being president was unsure, and the business of being majority leader was very sure--forever as far as I could see.

F: Had you worked with him on other legislation while he was Senate majority leader?

L: Yes. I worked with him on the desalting of water bill--in other words, adding more funds to the existing legislation on desalting of water. He had not actually thought about this himself, and you'll see the detail of this in the material I'm going to provide you. We did write a draft of an article for him, which was used finally in the New York Times on desalting of water.* He was very interested in it. He pushed Senator Anderson, who had been the specialist on water--

* See Exhibit A, attached.

F: Clinton Anderson?

L: Clinton Anderson. The total amount of money for desalting of water was very small. Johnson added to it very substantially in 1960. Exactly what has happened as a result now, as of currently this moment, I can't tell you. But whatever was done has been as a result of his [Johnson's] efforts.

F: It was out of this that you got that plant at Freeport, Texas, and the one off the--

L: The Freeport, Texas thing was being planned, and we got more money. Actually Johnson went to open the Freeport, Texas plant and asked me to go with him with the other senators and congressmen.

F: Did you go?

L: I did not go because they were starting at five in the morning and planned to return to Washington that night, and this is more than I have strength for.

F: That's a little too much interest, isn't it!

L: Then one day I went to see him about getting support for medical research. This was around 1959.

F: We can check that out.

L: In 1959. And he said, "How much money do you want?" I said, "We need for all the types of research against major diseases that afflict people in the United States--we need five hundred and sixty million dollars." He said, "Isn't that too much?" And I said, "Not if you want to live." He looked at me, and he said, "All right. What else do you want?" I said, "I want to see these senators who are new and whom I don't know." He turned, I think, to Mary Margaret Wiley [Valenti] and said, "Get them in here."

And they came. They were [Alan] Bible, [Gale] McGee and--I think it was [Robert] Byrd of West Virginia. They were new in 1960.

F: That was too soon for [Frank] Moss.

L: They were people that were on the Appropriations, so I think it was Byrd.

F: That's the West Virginia Byrd.

L: Yes, and I must say Johnson helped me very much with these people.

F: Could you tell if he was following up on your suggestions on things like this?

L: He also made a speech on the floor of the Senate on medical research to help us at the time the appropriations bill was up. The name of the committee was Research and Education Committee for a Free World--the committee that I was talking about.

F: Right.

L: He was extremely helpful on the medical research side in 1960 as majority leader, and the bill passed. That was a substantial increase over what there had been before.

F: This was with no administration push at all? This was strictly done out of the Senate?

L: This was in 1960 before the election. Now, it could have been 1959--wait a minute. That's one of the things that I can check. The date was 1959. He made a real effort about this, and I think was interested even after that in the field and realized how profoundly interested I was. After he was president he would sometimes say to me, "Oh, you've got too much money for research. I'm going to lower the budget," but actually he never did.

F: After this first introduction through the ministrations of Clark Clifford, from that time forward you had no difficulty in going to--

L: In reaching him myself, no.

F: Mrs. Johnson really hadn't emerged at this time, had she?

L: I had met Mrs. Johnson, and I had had lunch with her. But as I was really taking up specific pieces of legislation to the President, I had had no reason to go to see Mrs. Johnson. I would just go to Washington for a day or so and come back.

F: She was just the Senator's wife as far as you were concerned.

L: She invited me for lunch, and I thought she was charming. But I really didn't have any opportunity to know her until he became vice president.

F: During these Senate days, did he turn to you for help in any legislation beyond the help you'd given him already in providing some staff help and Joe McMurray, or did you originate most of the ideas which the two of you carried out?

L: He had the idea for housing, and he just wanted staff to help him. I had the idea that he should do something about desalting of water because it was a tremendous thing for his area, and for other states, and in the whole world. And actually I think it's because of his efforts and his influence that we're going to have a huge desalting plant of about 125 million gallons a day near San Diego for Los Angeles. Isn't that true?

F: Right.

L: But this is merely an outgrowth of that interest. You know, if you interest him in a subject, his mind immediately sees a whole vista of things, and he

can go logically from the particular to the general very fast. As you know, this is one of his great qualities in my mind. Don't you think so?

F: Yes. Okay, we had the Los Angeles convention now.

L: We had the Los Angeles convention and I was there. And when I was told that--

F: Unofficially?

L: Unofficially, yes. I heard Johnson debate with Kennedy which I think was on the Sunday night before the convention, and they were so bitter with each other that on Wednesday when I heard that he had accepted the offer for the nomination of the vice presidency, I was shocked. However, I went down to--where was it, the Colosseum?

F: Yes, the Colosseum.

L: Were you there?

F: No.

L: I was a friend of Mrs. Robert Kintner, the wife of the head of the National Broadcasting Company, and she's also a friend of the Johnsons. We said we'd go and wait for them to arrive at the Colosseum--the entrance, or wherever their car was coming. And we were alone there. There was nobody there. It was a sort of unknown spot, that nobody knew for sure where they were coming in, but we knew. We came to greet them, and they said, "Come with us. Come with us."

So we went into a little boxed-in room under the stadium, where there wasn't a breath of air, and waited for about ten minutes while the nominating speeches were made. There was all kinds of commotion outside. And then the

President went out and made his acceptance speech. It was a very exciting moment.

F: Did you see Mr. Johnson out there?

L: Yes. Mrs. Johnson was there, and his sister was there, and various other relatives were there.

F: Did he seem to be quite satisfied with the way things were working out as far as you could tell?

L: I was just amazed that he was willing to do this because he had so much sure power as the majority leader, and it was such a speculation about being a vice president. I was astonished. But any rate, he seemed to be enthusiastic about it.

F: Did you have any difficulty with your own New York friends in the party with Johnson on the ticket?

L: No. Wait a minute. He did come up to New York early in 1960, and I did go to see him--I think it was at the Waldorf. And he had some other friends there. He was trying to find out what people's attitude toward him for president would be. And he said to me, "Now, Mary Lasker, you go and talk to Mrs. Roosevelt, and tell her that I'm thinking about this, and also talk to Dolly Schiff, the publisher, and also editors of the Post. They've got the idea that I'm anti-Negro and that I'm anti-civil rights. I don't know where it has come from, but it's really not true, and you must convince them of this."

Well, I went to see Mrs. Roosevelt. Mrs. Roosevelt thought it was ridiculous for him to be trying to get the nomination because she felt that he was anti-civil rights. For what reason, I don't know, but she did.

F: He had put through the 1957 Civil Rights Bill, but most people never felt that--

L: I know. And he never got any credit for it. She said, "Why, he's a southerner, Mary. You're crazy! He isn't going to be interested in civil rights." I said, "Well, he says he is, and I believe him."

I also went to see the editor of the New York Post, and the publisher, Mrs. Schiff. And they both thought I was crazy. "Why, he's a southerner. He can't be for civil rights, and consequently he wouldn't be acceptable to the Northeast." I made no dent on them.

Then he didn't return to the area, and I thought he really had sort of given up the idea more or less, and he had so little time to work, to travel for a primary campaign. But then he did try for the nomination for president in spite of the New York attitude.

After the 1960 election, I did see him at The Elms sometimes, and I enjoyed being with Mrs. Johnson. She invited me to several lovely luncheons she gave when he was vice president: one for the Empress of Iran, and another for the wives of the Japanese cabinet members--which were absolutely charming, very well done, very well organized.

But he wasn't interested in the legislation that we'd been interested in before, and he wouldn't make any efforts about legislation in any area that I was interested in. I don't know what he did in other areas. He must have done a lot about NASA. But he wasn't interested in health legislation at this time.

F: Just a matter of keeping his hands off the Senate?

L: He kept his hands off of everything. And I thought he was terribly bored, and that it was a very unlikely situation for him to be in.

Well, then came the terrible day of the twenty-second of November, and everything changed. On the Saturday after that Friday--was it Saturday?

F: Were you here at that time?

L: I was here. The death of Kennedy was on Friday.

F: Right. Friday noon.

L: He called me up, and he said--

F: The day after?

L: Yes, the twenty-third. And he said, "Now, I'm talking to all my friends, and I want you to know that I need your help. We're going to do the best we can." He spoke in a very affirmative way. I suppose he called two or three hundred people that day, but at least I was one of them. And I said I was coming to Washington, and he said, "Why don't you come for dinner Sunday night?" And I did.

F: At The Elms?

L: At The Elms. Abe Fortas was there, and the child of the governor of Texas--what's his name, that's such a great friend?

F: Connally?

L: Connally. And three or four other people, not many people. We talked a little bit, but he was very busy on the phone. He was very wrought up really, I thought.

F: In that period of the vice presidency, that's just strictly a period of a developing friendship and not anything concrete?

L: That's right. I saw more of Mrs. Johnson then at last.

F: So you got to know her a bit better.

L: Yes. And she was very much interested--she loved The Elms, and Florence Mahoney and I gave her some Chinese porcelain for decorations. I gave her, I think, eight old eighteenth century silver candlesticks or something because she wanted the house to look very pretty. And we took an interest in this together.

F: President Kennedy named you to the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission.

L: Yes, he did, but that was because of Johnson. I was in California at Romanoff's Restaurant, and the head of the restaurant came over and said, "Someone wants you on the phone." And he gave some name I'd never heard of before. I said, "What is it?" And he said, "Oh, I think it's some moving company." It was so peculiar that I got up and I went to the phone because they were very persistent, and I said, "Who's calling me?" It was Vice President Johnson. He said, "Listen, will you be on the Equal Opportunity Employment Committee?" I said, "Oh, you know that isn't my field." He said, "Oh, yes, you should do it." I said, "Do you really want me to?" He said, "Yes, I do." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because I need a good New York name." I said, "All right."

F: Was this a presidential commission?

L: Yes.

F: And as I recall, Johnson headed the commission.

L: He headed it, yes. And Goldberg was on it. And Goldberg was the vice chairman, and he often conducted the meetings and was very good.

F: Was it a fairly effective working commission?

L: I think it was a working commission that had quite a lot of effect. They got big industries to start to hire Negroes.

F: What was your role--mainly to show up for meetings and go over the material?

L: Mine was to show up for meetings and agree with them. Naturally, I was in accord with them.

F: But you did have a feeling that the Vice President had a commitment to what he was doing?

L: Oh, there was no doubt about that.

F: Now then, he's president, and you've gone to dinner on Sunday night.

L: Right before the funeral of the former President.

F: When did you begin to be active in the Johnson Administration?

L: In the interim I had suggested to President Kennedy that not enough was being done in the federal government about cancer or strokes or heart disease, and wouldn't he please appoint a commission to try to get more done! This represented 71 per cent of all deaths. And he had said repeatedly, "yes," but the staff work fell down. The commission was to be appointed the week of his death--the next week.

I told this to the President that night, and he said: "Oh, I've already heard 962 things he was going to do." And I said, "Well, he really was going to do this." He said, "Well, talk to Abe about it." Abe Fortas.

I also had mentioned that, as president, Kennedy was interested in the National Cultural Center, that it would be a marvelous memorial to

him. It would be a living memorial. He said, "Well, take it up with Abe."

F: You got the idea that Fortas was a sort of unofficial administrative assistant for him.

L: That's right. He was sorting things out for him. I, at the time, and have always thought he had extremely good judgment, except in the one matter which seems to have been a sad mistake.

F: Right. President Kennedy also had named you on a National Cultural Center Committee. But at this time it hadn't really evolved into what it became.

L: The trustees had raised about at this time eleven million dollars, and we thought that it was going to cost about forty-eight million dollars. Well, we realized that unless we got some federal money some way that we couldn't raise the money, because Washington isn't a town of rich people, as you know. And people in the United States don't seem to me to be patriotic enough, or thrilled enough about the nation's capital.

F: They don't see Washington as their big national monument.

L: No, they don't. So the death of Kennedy gave many people this same idea. When the Congress opened the next Tuesday, there were many people who had the idea, and Fulbright was among them, and put in a bill to make the Cultural Center Kennedy's national memorial. But by this time, I had spoken to Abe, and the administration was willing to do whatever it could about it. The idea was that the federal government would give half the money, and then we would get a fourteen million, five hundred thousand dollar loan for the building of a garage, which would be paid off from

the rents of the garage. So this was also talked about, or mentioned, this evening.

F: Did you talk to him at all about naming it for Kennedy at this time?

L: Yes.

F: Did he seem receptive?

L: He seemed receptive, yes. He was very generous-minded, really. And the difficulties with Bobby Kennedy had not started. The bill passed by February of 1964. As you see, the monument is rising, and will be a great, splendid--

F: Yes. I've had an apartment right there where I could watch it grow for some time.

L: Good! Were you acting in some official capacity?

F: In this. I took an apartment in Washington when I began this project.

L: How long ago was that?

F: That was May, 1968.

L: Oh good! So you're well along, yes.

F: Did you see him any more during these very sad and busy days?

L: Yes, I did. Mrs. Johnson called me up, I think the seventh of December, 1963, and said they were coming in the next day for the funeral of Senator Lehman, and would I fly back down with them and spend the night at the White House. I was delighted to do this, and I went back on a very dreary day, worse than this today.

F: Had they moved in, or were they still at The Elms?

L: They had spent one night at the White House, and this was the second night they were going to spend there. And we went into this house at this time

of night, all draped in black. It was one of the saddest things I've ever done in my life.

F: More like going in a mausoleum.

L: It was so sad and pathetic. And we all walked around talking in whispers. Then the next day we went to The Elms and picked out things that Mrs. Johnson especially liked that she wanted to transfer to the White House. And we talked about the pictures that she wanted to arrange in her own room. We had just a nice pleasant time with ourselves. But it was very dreary and she felt--and I think everyone felt--not at all at home, and very sad.

Then we met from time to time, and of course, I supported them in the campaign in 1964. Then after the campaign was over I called to congratulate her. She said, "Oh, Mary, if you think of anything that I should do when we're in the White House, do tell me." I said, "Well, I'll think about that, and I'll send you a memo."*

F: Up until now she hadn't really rushed to the forefront to be a sort of official--

L: No. She kept saying, "Well, if we're back." She didn't plan at all. She didn't seem at all--

F: She just marked time until November.

L: She felt as if she shouldn't make any definitive plans, or be pretentious enough--you know, she's very unpretentious--to think that she was surely going back. But once it was settled, she then said, "If you think of anything I should do, let me know."

* See Exhibit B, attached.

F: To go back a moment, she came up here in January, and you all had lunch together, in January, 1964.

L: We came up to see some museums to see what paintings they would loan to the White House. I invited some people to--

F: She was beginning to think about--

L: To go on with making the White House look attractive. Some of the pictures that had been loaned to Mrs. Kennedy had been taken back already.

F: Then a little over two weeks later the President himself came to a party at your home.

L: Yes. That was after the awards given by the Kennedy family at one of the hotels here. They gave awards in the field of mental retardation.

F: The President came up for that.

L: Yes. Then a great many people that were at that dinner and some others came here--about a hundred people for drinks.

F: Did you see any of the relationship between the President and Attorney General Kennedy during Robert Kennedy's campaign for the Senate from New York? Did he talk with you?

L: Did the President talk with me?

F: Yes.

L: No. He didn't talk with me, but I later--

F: He did come up here and work for him.

L: I remember I was at the speech in Madison Square Garden.

F: Give me your impressions of that Madison Square Garden evening.

L: That was a terrible night, as I recall. I had a great sense that there was tension. But the President carried it off wonderfully, with great--

F: He was well received here.

L: Oh, very well received. He carried it off with great self-confidence.

F: You endorsed Bobby Kennedy. Did you actively work for him in helping support him?

L: I gave him money. No. I gave him some money for his campaign. I'm not a speaker, so what else can you do! There's really very little.

F: They need money more than they do speakers usually. Most of them are willing to do their own speaking.

L: I was anxious to have a Democratic senator from the state. And I thought that if he could win that he would be active and good. I didn't realize that we were erecting a challenger. This didn't seem to me to be conceivable.

F: Back in the days when you used to see Mr. Johnson when he was vice president, did you feel any particular tension between him and President Kennedy? Other than the fact that he was vice president and in an insufficient role?

L: I think that he was vice president and that Johnson was never meant to be a second man in anything. I never saw them together except at a very large party. I just felt that Johnson was bored at being vice president and that he felt that in many areas he didn't have influence, where he was used to having influence on everything, as you know. But I wasn't personally ever present when they were together alone.

F: So you never got to observe anything there.

Okay, he has been re-elected now, and Mrs. Johnson is looking for ideas. Do you suggest them, or does she suggest them?

L: I suggested that she might be interested in improving the appearance of the vast federal highway system in the United States and in the beauty of our cities, and I wrote her a memorandum along these lines. I also suggested that she be interested in the health of the people of the United States.*

F: Just for the record, you had already been active on Fifth Avenue and Park Avenue?

L: Yes.

F: So you came with some practical knowledge of how it was done.

L: Yes. And I had always been interested very much in the whole conception that we didn't give ourselves a fair break in the United States; that we weren't visual-minded about the environment in which we lived; and that we spent a great deal of money on technology and then didn't make anything look attractive.

F: Did Mrs. Johnson embrace this?

L: She embraced this. This is very natural to her.

F: You didn't have to sell her.

L: No. She adores natural beauty--outdoor beauty. Now at the same time, the President had already thought to appoint a commission on natural beauty which, within a few weeks, turned in a report called "The Commission Report on Natural Beauty," which was an excellent report. It was one of the best reports I've ever read, written by Charlie Haar, partly at least, of Harvard, and some other people. It was really excellent.

Now the President was very in sympathy with this idea, and with Mrs. Johnson. Don't you agree?

* See Exhibit B, attached.

F: Right.

L: It wasn't anything that was foreign to his feelings. He's very visual-minded himself and likes things to be well done. He is also a great and compassionate man who wants to help people. When he was in office, any hard experience he felt human beings suffering from made him want to introduce legislation to help.

F: He likes to see results.

L: He likes the beauty of the outdoors. He likes man-made beauty, too.

F: Were you involved in that White House conference on natural beauty?

L: Oh yes, I certainly was. I was involved in it.

F: What did you do?

L: I didn't speak, but I was present the whole time, and I was very interested.

F: Who got up the agenda for that? It was a very impressive group of people.

L: I think Laurance Rockefeller was involved in this. He was the chairman, as I recall, of the conference.

F: Yes, he was. Had you become involved yet with National Park Service?

L: No, I was just getting to know Nash Castro at this time. Then Mrs. Johnson started the idea of forming a committee, and I thought she should form a committee for the nation--you know, a national committee. She said, "No, let's form a committee and make Washington itself an example." Well, I was a little disappointed, but I thought, "Maybe she's right, maybe a national committee's too big to handle, and maybe we better do something in Washington." So we would go around and look to see what could be done.

F: You actually took tours in a sense?

L: Oh, we took tours all the time. We looked at the schools--

F: Were these unannounced and relatively unchaperoned?

L: Oh yes, unannounced and in plain cars--dark Buick sedans. We were always talking about it.

Among the things that I did was to help interest some people like Mrs. Vincent Astor from New York in the matter. But you have a pretty good summary of what happened about that from Nash's memoirs.

Now the things that I did myself were the plantings of the daffodils in Rock Creek Park--there are about 200-300,000 there--and some additional ones along West Potomac Parkway. Then we planted about 800,000 daffodils in what is now Lady Bird Johnson Park. Altogether over 1,110,000 daffodils were planted, about 2500 dogwood trees were also planted, and we're planting a few more dogwood trees this fall and in the spring to fill out the gaps. So I hope it will be the most beautiful dogwood grove in the world, all in Mrs. Johnson's honor. Also, I gave 10,000 azaleas that bloom on Pennsylvania Avenue.

In addition to that we planted the whole of Hains Point, which is something that Mrs. Johnson deplored because it was ugly--didn't have enough trees--with 1,800 Yoshino cherries. Andre Meyer and I gave the money for that.

F; Is that Mrs. Eugene Meyer?

L: No, Andre Meyer, the banker--the head of Lazard Freres. And I gave them money for the jet fountain that's at the end of Hains Point, which was

badly engineered, and which has got to be fixed. It was given in honor of the President and Mrs. Johnson.

F: I know. It didn't allow for the Potomac freezing, among other things.

L: Yes, we've had a hard time with it, but it will rise again, and I hope it will be known as the Johnson Jet.

F: That's a good name. Have you gotten any feeling that you've set in motion a beautification program here in the District that no administration can reduce--that the momentum is going to hold up?

L: Yes. There were many trees planted, other than the ones I gave or that were done directly by our committee, and then the daffodils, which will come up almost forever, you know. I planted 10,000 azaleas on Pennsylvania Avenue, and at least another 10,000 azaleas will be planted in the Washington area as a result of this effort. This will really make the city so much more beautiful than any other one city in the spring--that is really incomparable in the Western Hemisphere.

F: People will come, I think, just to see it.

L: They do. They came just to see the cherry trees at the Tidal Basin, which is the thing that inspired me when I was a child. I came to see it and I was breathless about it. I didn't see why we shouldn't have much, much more. If those few hundred trees gave so much joy, why not spread it around! Then Kenwood, the suburb of Washington, is so marvelous. It's about forty square blocks all planted in Yoshino cherries.

So Mrs. Johnson did a very good TV program about what she thought should be done nationally. She did a very good piece for Life. We had a

good piece in Readers Digest.* And we hope that sparks took hold. In fact, we know they did in many places.

Of course the trouble with this is that it needs to be kept going, and had she stayed in the White House another four years, I think that efforts would have been more solidly rooted. But I think it's a great historical achievement to have done what she did, and that someone at some time will take it up again. It will move again because it's something so profoundly needed by the country.

F: I've noticed it in--

L: People are starved for beauty.

F: That's right. I've noticed it in just these four or five years in pretty dismal little crossroads towns that in a bare patch they'll have a batch of zinnias or chrysanthemums or something flowering there, where once upon a time they wouldn't have had anything but weeds and dirt.

L: Yes. I've noticed it downtown in Manhattan.

Now I want to say that my association with the Johnsons is one of the happiest, pleasantest things of my later late; and that I think that both of them are extraordinarily unusual and wonderful people; that he as a humanitarian, has energy and gift for work and foresight that makes him a great president; and that she had kindness and self-control and restraint, and yet charm that made her a very unusual first lady. She, at the same time, wanted to contribute in a special way, which I think will set a standard for other first ladies.

F: Did you get a feeling that she came to this--she's certainly in one way the most active first lady since Eleanor Roosevelt. But whereas Mrs.

* See Exhibit D, attached.

Roosevelt was great for going into the slums and dealing with the problems there--

L: Oh, she was not interested in beauty at all.

F: --that Mrs. Johnson is interested in the sort of positive beauty aspect, and less concerned with the kind of misery.

L: That's right. She was. She was interested in the pleasure that positive beauty would give people.

F: Did she ever show more than just a friend's interest in your work in Planned Parenthood?

L: No, but she was interested in it, and she saw John Rockefeller and me one day about it, and tried to help us with the President. Rockefeller wanted to get an Institute for Planned Parenthood established.

F: Did you talk with the President at all? You know, he did stick his neck out on Planned Parenthood to some extent. This is still not entirely a non-controversial issue.

L: Yes, I know he did. And I blessed him at that time. I bless him for having done it.

F: Did he talk with you on it that you recall?

L: I was not the person that got him to do it, although I would have been happy if I had.

I urged President Johnson to ask Dr. Shannon, the Director of the National Institutes of Health, and the heads of the various categorical Institutes what their recent research results had been, and what their plans were for progress in lowering the death and disability rates in those diseases for which the various Institutes were responsible.

After several conversations with the President, he did call such a meeting. Dr. Shannon and the individual Institute heads were stunned that they were supposed to get specific results, like lowering the death and disability rates! They were quite resentful and hostile to this "unreasonable" request.

The President met with them twice, as I recall, but made no impression on Shannon or the heads of the Institute on the need to save lives and prevent disabilities. Their conception was they were just to "investigate," not to try to get clinical answers to major diseases. This made me angry, and I decided many steps would have to be taken to change this attitude so that lives could be saved through research which was finally directed to clinical results for human beings.

Finally, Secretary Gardner of Health, Education, and Welfare, who was not interested in health problems at all, or in getting any pay-offs from the research supported by NIH, got the President to go out to the NIH to make a speech, saying that the NIH was a "billion dollar success." That was to placate the Institute heads. If President Johnson had had the time and opportunity to realize the significance of their total lack of goal-direction in research, he would never have given in to doing this, but in the enormous welter of things any president had to cope with, he was just not able to make the NIH more goal-directed.

F: You gave a luncheon at the State Department after one of Mrs. Johnson's beautification tours.

L; Yes.

F: In April of 1966.

L: Yes, we gave a luncheon there in order to interest people and get contributions for the committee. Then Mrs. Johnson gave two luncheons at the White House, which were really for the same purpose--to thank the people who had given money, and try to keep the interest going, and develop new interests, which they did. She was a wonderful hostess, and people enjoyed coming.

F: Did you seek out Nash Castro? Did he seek you?

L: No, he was a friend of Mrs. Johnson's. I met him really through her.

F: So you sort of inherited him.

L: Yes, I inherited him, and she was thrilled about it.

F: That became a good working relationship.

L: Oh marvelous! He's such a wonderful person. We couldn't have gotten nearly as much done or with as much pleasure were it not for Nash's help.

F: We talked about this before we turned on the tape. The President's work in trying to spread medical benefits for the country was pretty much his own activity and not as a result of pressure on your part, or education.

L: I interested him after he became president in going ahead with appointing a commission on cancer, heart, and stroke, which he did in the spring of 1964. This commission brought him recommendations which he sent to Congress in the form of legislation, and the bill was passed in the fall of 1965. The bill was tampered with by the AMA and so made less effective than it would have been had it not been tampered with by them in committee. But it is still a substantial help in the field of cancer, heart, and

stroke, and in the getting of better services to people at regional levels.

F: Did you do work in medical costs, which became a Johnson concern?

L: You mean in Medicare?

F: Yes.

L: No. I published a small book summarizing his efforts in the health field, which came out about a year and a half ago.* Have you got that?

F: No.

L: I think you ought to have that.

F: I'd like to have it. You were, maybe still are, vice chairman of a Committee of a Hundred for National Health Insurance?

L: I am.

F: Does that have any Johnson relationship?

L: No. I was interested in health insurance in the 1940s. We were frustrated by lack of leadership in Congress and by the AMA being very superiorly organized and financed. I gave up the fight. Then about a year ago, Walter Reuther called me up and said, "You know, I was on this commission of Truman's on health. I realize a great undone thing is health insurance, and I want to do something about it. I want to form a committee. Will you be vice chairman of it?" I said, "Yes."

F: Is it a fairly active committee?

L: Oh, it's a very active committee. It's very important because Walter is like a tiger.

F: He runs kind of like Johnson, too, doesn't he?

L: Yes.

* See Exhibit E, attached.

F: Right. You were named a member in the summer of 1968 of the Citizens Stamp Advisory Commission.

L: Yes.

F: Tell me about that. What's behind it?

L: You know, Lady Bird and I, by this time, were really absolutely very, very close friends, and we wanted to promote the idea of beautification by whichever means we could. We had had one stamp that the President suggested to Larry O'Brien, I think, from a postcard that I gave Johnson of the Jefferson Memorial with a branch of cherry blossoms.* Then we felt that we should have some more stamps that would symbolize our efforts. They came out last fall in a group of four stamps on a page. One was "Plant for More Beautiful Highways," which had a highway picture; "Plant for More Beautiful Cities," which had a picture of a street in a city; "Plant for More Beautiful Parks," and it had a vast field of daffodils; and the other was "Plant for More Beautiful Streets," and that had a small street park. This was done really with the help of Marvin Watson, then postmaster general.*

F: It was not a presidential committee, but it was a citizens--

L: Oh, there's a regular citizens stamp committee that advises the Postmaster General. But Watson was in great sympathy with Mrs. Johnson in her efforts, so he really told the committee what to do, and put me on the committee to be sure that it was done. Although it was really all decided by the time I got on the committee. The committee was a very gay, lively committee. I've never been on such a gay, lively committee.

* See Exhibit F, attached.

F: Does it just meet on call, or does it have regular meetings?

L: No, we had regular meetings, as I recall, once a month I think.

F: Do all prospective stamps--

L: They get before them, yes. But it has to have the approval of the Postmaster General. You can't get anything done without him.

F: Did you have any clues that Mr. Johnson wasn't going to run again in 1968?

L: I did not. I was absolutely shocked beyond words.

F: Where were you when this happened?

L: In Palm Beach.

F: Were you listening?

L: I was listening. I was absolutely horrified.

F: Did you call the Johnsons?

L: Yes, when I got my breath.

F: Did you talk to him or to her?

L: I talked to her.

F: How did she seem to be taking it?

L: She seemed to be not distressed.

F: Her usual controlled self, huh? You weren't at that "doers" luncheon at which Eartha Kitt made her--?

L: No, I was at another one at which she had talked about beautification, an earlier one.

F: Did you take any active role in the 1968 campaign? Did you go to the convention?

L: No.

F: You missed Chicago then.

L: I missed Chicago. I didn't want to be mixed up in it. I was a substantial supporter of Hubert Humphrey's. I've always been friendly with Humphrey.

F: Do you think that the charge is justified that Mr. Johnson wanted Humphrey to lose?

L: I can't believe that.

F: You couldn't support it.

L: I can't support it. I can't believe it.

F: Or refute it either.

L: No. I just took it that it was patently not to his or anybody else's advantage for Humphrey to lose.

F: I can't believe, regardless of the candidate, that he'd ever want the Democrats to lose.

L: I can't believe it.

F: The President awarded you the Medal of Freedom.

L: Yes.

F: Just before going out of office. Tell me something about that.

L: I just got it in the mail. It was a delightful surprise. He decided the twentieth of January. There was no ceremony, and it was a beautiful citation and a medal.

F: Did you go down to Washington for that last day?

L: No. I gave a party here with six or seven other friends at the Plaza, I think it was the night of the eleventh or fourteenth or something like

that of January, in the Johnsons' honor. And the last day I didn't go. It was too sad.

F: Tell me about that last party.

L: It was one of the best parties I ever went to in my life. It was one of the most beautiful, gayest--

F: It was a happy party and wasn't a wake.

L: Oh, no, it was marvelous. Everybody was in the best spirits. The music was good. The flowers were magnificent. Orange roses! The ballroom looked wonderful. Everyone was wonderfully dressed. Everyone had a marvelous time. Mrs. Johnson looked beautiful.

F: A total success.

L: Yes.

F: Good. You went down to the Ranch after they went out of office in May of 1969--this year.

L: Yes.

F: For the dedication of the Lady Bird Johnson Municipal Park in Fredericksburg.

L: I certainly did.

F: Tell me about your impressions on that.

L: I thought it was tremendous.

(Interruption)

F: We were talking about the May, 1969 Fredericksburg ceremony.

L: Oh, it was charming. It was a lovely, country celebration with a charming area for recreation and parks.

F: Were there a number of guests from the old days down there?

L: Mr. and Mrs. Laurance Rockefeller and Mrs. Astor and myself. I think that was all.

F: On this beautification, the names that keep coming up are the same--like you and like Laurance Rockefeller. What did you do? Did you have just kind of an easy relationship and call each other when you felt something needed to be done, and talk about how was best to do it?

L: What happened largely was that people--

F: Who pushes on this?

L: Mrs. Johnson was very much the center of what happened. People saw things that they were interested in doing. Mrs. Astor was interested in doing a really good playground for Buchanan School that was almost indestructible. They were able to do some things to destroy it, but not much. Children are very violent and badly behaved in the poorer schools in Washington. She wanted to try to do something there. Laurance Rockefeller wanted to take a poor area that had a little stream running through it that needed to be made into a park, and he did this. I did the other things--the Johnson Jet, half the cherries on Hains Point, 2500 dogwoods for Lady Bird Johnson Park, 1,100,000 daffodils all over, and 10,000 azaleas on Pennsylvania Avenue.

F: I visited that.

L: --that were described.

F: Have you done follow-up work on some of these more depressed areas, to see how they held up?

L: Yes. We got some money to do two small parks in one of the depressed areas. I've been around to see the places. Some of them are not terribly

encouraging. That's why I'm for making very beautiful areas like parks, very full of flowers, so that people who want to get out of these areas can get out and can go some place that is serene and beautiful. The overcrowding and the bad behavior of the children seems to be such that you can't plant schools in poor neighborhoods successfully. It's very hard to keep up very well plantings that are in very seriously depressed areas. But, still, a great deal has been done.

F: Do you have a feeling that you're better served if there's a certain, you might say, segregated area which you do beautify and then you let the idea of beauty spill over from there?

L: I think that Washington on the whole, once the rest of the rebuilding that's proposed is done, and if--

(Interruption)

You were asking a question that I wanted to answer. I think you have to make beautiful the center of a city and its parks and streets, and hope that there'll be money enough and interest enough to make the whole city beautiful. But you have to concentrate on some places so as to really lift people's spirits by a really big visible effort.

F: That some kind of contagion will come out of that.

L: That's right. But you have to do an awful lot of talking about it, and it's not an easy thing to do. Because people that aren't doers don't seem to be very visual-minded. Have you noticed that in life?

F: Right.

L: They seem to be able to build without seeing what they're building, or what the total effect is.

F: They don't contemplate.

L: They're just like some people who are tone deaf. Now, I'm nearly tone deaf--not quite, but not musical. Some people are just not visual.

F: You've done a lot for music for a nearly tone deaf person.

L: I haven't done as much as I would have if I'd been musical.

F: You worked both sides of this street. Have you found a relationship between mental health and beauty?

L: I think there is. I think people are terribly depressed by ugliness.

F: In your mental health work, have you tried to beautify the surroundings of people with problems?

L: Well, no, not in that sense. Because people that are severely ill are incarcerated in these big city and state hospitals. It's beyond my power. You're lucky if you get extra doctors to help.

F: Yes, to get them a bed. Thank you, Mrs. Lasker.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of Mary Lasker

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Mary Lasker of New York City, do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of the personal interviews conducted on November 10, 1969 and July 19, 1978 at New York City and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) Until January 1, 2000, the transcripts shall be available only to those researchers who have secured my written authorization. Thereafter, the transcripts shall be available to all researchers.

(2) Until January 1, 2000, the tape recordings shall be available only to those researchers who have secured my written authorization. Thereafter, the tape recordings shall be available to all researchers.

(3) Until January 1, 2000, I retain all copyright in the material given to the United States by the terms of this instrument. Thereafter, the copyright in both the transcripts and tape recordings shall pass to the United States Government.

(4) Until January 1, 2000, copies of the interview transcripts or tape recordings may not be provided to researchers except upon the donor's written authorization. Thereafter, copies of the transcript and the tape recordings may be provided by the library to researchers upon request.

(5) Until January 1, 2000, copies of the interview transcripts or tape recordings may not be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. Thereafter, copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be deposited in or loaned to other institutions.

X Mary Lasker
Donor

Aug. 17, 79
Date

acting James E. O'Neill
Archivist of the United States

March 12, 1980
Date