INTERVIEW II

DATE: JUNE 16, 1975

INTERVIEWEE: ELIZABETH ROWE (Mrs. James Rowe) (Tape 1 of 1)

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Mrs. Rowe's home in Washington, D.C.

G: Okay, we're on.

R: What was that, 1955?

G: Yes.

R: Yes. That D.C. Auditorium Committee or Commission was the predecessor to the Cultural Center Commission, which in turn was a predecessor to the Kennedy Center Commission. It was through then-Senator Johnson that I was appointed as a member. I was actually appointed by President Nixon, who was Vice President. The Senate had two [appointments], the House had two, and the President had . . . I don't know how many. But that was the way the appointments were divided up. Then-Senator Johnson said that he put me on the committee because he thought of me as his oldest Washington friend, a real Washingtonian in other words. I was very flattered. Our mission was to find a place and make the plans for a good auditorium which could be used for the performing arts and could be used for inaugural balls and inaugural events. It was through my work on that committee--I was a member of the Site and Design Subcommittee--that I got really carried away by the physical planning of the city. I had always been interested in the city as a long-time resident and valued its parks and its beauty, but I didn't realize what

the mechanics of planning the city were. Through working on this D.C. Auditorium Commission I got to know the Planning Commission, saw models and plans, and worked with the Park Service. So I always said to President Johnson that he was the one who made me into a planner.

G: Did you do anything specifically for him or at his suggestion on this?

R: No, it was an opposite relationship. We got along with a very modest budget on the D.C. Auditorium Commission, and he never made any suggestions. I made suggestions to him about the money we needed to keep the commission going, and he saw that we got the money.

G: He was responsive?

R: Yes. I can remember asking him for $100,000 to keep the committee going, and he saw that we got that.

G: Is there anything else on that committee that you want to talk about?

R: Not in relation to President Johnson. But I have been grateful to him always because it did give me much more knowledge of the physical planning of the city than I would have had from any other place. I learned.

G: It led to things that followed, I suppose.

R: That's right.

G: Now what about the National Capital Planning Committee. He put you on that commission.

R: Well actually I was appointed by President Kennedy in 1961 for a six-year term, and I stayed on for seven years. I asked President Johnson not to reappoint me because I was tired, but I stayed on for an extra year because there were plans afoot to really emasculate

the Planning Commission which I was in violent disagreement with. I stayed on an extra year to battle.

G: Why did they want to abolish it?

R: A number of forces were at work. I don't believe in conspiracies, but I do know that the highway lobby . . . In my years on the Planning Commission we had really slowed down the freeway and the highways in the city of Washington. Speculative real estate interests in the city didn't like our careful review of their asking for zoning changes. That combined with the tiny-minded men in the Bureau of the Budget, who felt that the National Capital Planning Commission was a kind of hybrid. It was a Federal agency doing the local planning as well as the planning for the Federal establishment. It was a combination of the forces at work through the district building trying to get the Planning Commission's wings clipped so that we couldn't go on stopping highways and bad speculative real estate operations.

G: Did LBJ have an interest in the Planning Commission?

R: Through me, I really believe, because just when we were about to be beheaded I appealed to him, and he stopped the Bureau of the Budget plan. That was at the end of the time that I was on the Planning Commission.

G: Do you recall the conversation between you and him?

R: It wasn't a conversation; it was a desperate, last-minute letter that I sent to him saying essentially what I have said to you. "This is the situation . . ."

Well, I put it in more positive terms, because I thought that the Planning Commission was doing a really first-rate job of planning for the city and for the Federal establishment. I think that this is a Federal city and there has to be a large Federal voice in it. Apparently I convinced him. The plan of the Bureau of the Budget was dropped.

G: Did he ever say afterwards that he attributed that to your letter?

R: I don't believe he did, but everybody in the Bureau of the Budget did and the White House staff did.

G: You indicated that he wanted to appoint you to the Washington, D.C. commissionership.

R: Yes. While I was serving on the Planning Commission he offered me twice the job of D.C. commissioner. He said that he wanted me to take Walter Dobryner's place, who was the chairman. I didn't ask him whether he wanted me to be the chairman; that was sort of implicit in what he said. But since I was going to say no, it didn't matter whether it was chairman or a member of this three-man commission.

The time that I remember most vividly when he offered it to me, I was up on the second floor of the White House with Bird. We were working perhaps on a Beautification problem, or maybe we had just gone for a walk. Anyway, he called me into his bedroom. He was sick in bed. It was the time of the Churchill funeral and he had the

great bank of TV screens all showing the Churchill funeral. He was lying in bed, and there was the President of the United States saying to me, "Elizabeth, you've got to do this. This is your home town and you love it, and you've got to take this job." I said that as chairman of the Planning Commission I felt myself stretched to do that job and to be a good wife and mother, and I just couldn't take on anything more. He was most persuasive, and I was firm. I just knew I couldn't do it. I don't know whether it was after that occasion or a previous time when he offered it to me, but there was a dinner I believe at the Statler. It was called the Candlelight Dinner. It was in honor of Eleanor Roosevelt, and it was put together by some sort of women's group. He spoke at it and he spoke about getting women in government. He said, "But my big trouble is when I find somebody that's just perfect for the job, she turns me down." I was right below him at the table right below the head table. Apparently I blushed crimson, because he looked me right in the eye when he said that. I can still feel myself getting red. He didn't say what it was, but he looked right at me. So you can see why I am so fond of him, because he paid me a tremendous compliment.

G: Did he give other reasons why he wanted you on the commission?

R: Well, he said that I was a Washingtonian, I loved my city, he thought that I could do a good job, I owed it to the city, and I should do it for him.

G: Were there any particular interests that he wanted represented on that?

Did he see anything that you could do in terms of--

R: No, he just knew me as a Washingtonian, my concern for the city all the way through. He knew I had been for home rule. He knew I was very interested in the physical planning of the city because I had been working on it. And I think he really did feel that I was his oldest Washingtonian friend.

G: Can you recall other conversations with him in the White House, let's say? In addition to the one where he was sick.

R: Jim and I went to dinner there, and we would talk about the passing scene. I spent quite a lot of time with Lady Bird there because I was a member of her committee, and I used to see him then. Oh yes, and then in 1964 I worked in the East Wing on White House mail, first Lady Bird's mail and then the ordinary mail that came to the President that obviously he couldn't answer. So it was answered in Lady Bird's name, saying the President's too busy but we're so glad to hear from you. I ran that operation of mail, and he was pleased with that. I can remember one time in the garden when he was planting I think a little leaf linden tree. I was there, and [I can remember] his saying, "Come over here; I want to speak to you," and telling me how pleased he was with some of the letters I had written that his wife had shown him.

G: Did you ever wonder how he was able to know about all of these different operations at once?

R: He did know. He was sincerely interested in everything that was going on.

And then he had that extra vitality so he had the energy to pursue things that he was interested in. But I was startled, for instance, when he said, "Those are good letters you are writing." I hadn't any idea that he would have been aware of that, but he was.

G: I have heard it said that Mrs. Johnson was his best advisor.

R: I would think so, too.

G: I guess the image I had at the time was that she didn't have much of an input there, that it was merely trying to get him to slow down. But evidently she did advise him a lot on substance.

R: Oh, I'm sure she must have.

G: Can you recall occasions.

R: I would think that that was always done privately, but I don't know. She is a woman of very firm views, and he trusted her judgment, and I am sure he asked her for her judgment.

G: I also understand that people would use her as a conduit to get to him. Ideas that they wanted submitted to him they would sometimes take to her.

R: Well, probably. You use any conduit that you can to reach the President. But I never wanted to involve him in anything that I was working on except the preservation of the institution of the Planning Commission. That's the only time I--

G: --really lobbied with him.

R: Yes. On the substantive issues of the work of the commission I didn't.

G: Let's talk about the Beautification Committee and your role here. First of all, how did it start?

R: I certainly can't take full credit, but I did write to Bird right after the '64 election when they were still in Texas and suggested that she might extend beyond the White House to the city of Washington a program of beauty. After all, Jackie Kennedy had done marvelous things inside the White House, and I thought Bird could do marvelous things for the city, with its parks, its schools, planting around public housing, street trees. Other people were interested, too. Of course, Secretary [of the Interior Stewart] Udall was interested in a national beautification program. That's one of the things Bird used to say to me: "Can't you think of a word that's better than beautification?" It's very difficult. I couldn't come up with a better word. I suppose.

G: I suppose that people did try to think of another term.

R: Yes, but we never could find something that said what we wanted to say.

G: Why was the focus on Washington rather than the nation as a whole?

R: Because they were here, and she was here. It was a national program, but it did start here. After all, it was the nation's capital, and they were here. There were great things that could be done and were done.

G: I was going to ask you: did she talk about your letter, initially, to you?

R: No. The next thing I guess I got a request to come up for some ideas to be on the committee, different groups. And I helped put the

committee together with representatives of the district government, of the Parks Service, Public Buildings, Public Housing, business groups.

G: I understand that there were some diverse opinions with regard to what beautification in the capital should focus on, whether it should be more floral installations and historic sites, and which areas of the city it would be located in, whether it would focus on the more impoverished areas. In other words, how much of it would be a social program for the lower-income people.

R: Oh, that was very much in the minds of everybody.

G: How did you feel about that?

R: I thought it should be all-encompassing. When I first wrote to Bird I suggested improving the public housing through landscaping the schools of the city, the small parks and reservations as well as the big parks. This was not a program to build schools or build public housing, but the social side of it was always in everybody's mind, and involving the schoolchildren in the program.

G: Was there conflict within the committee with regard to where the focus should be?

R: No.

G: I've gotten the impression that some people were very adamantly in favor of one side and some people the other.

R: I think people are looking for something that wasn't there, because

I was there from the beginning and went to every meeting. The thing that I wanted to have the most attention paid to was the city street trees. That was something that I used to bring up all the time. It's run by the highway department of the district, and I thought it didn't get enough attention. There were people with different interests, but there was no problem of focus here or there. There was plenty of time and talent to focus across the board.

G: Do you think this was in Mrs. Johnson's mind or in the President's mind related to the old New Deal era of beautifying with the NYA and the CCC?

R: Well, I hadn't thought of it that way, but I'm sure it must have been in the President's mind in the national program. I believe he said something about it in one of his speeches. But you know, 1964 was very early on in the concern about environment. There was concern but it wasn't so fashionable in those days. I think this national program was a tremendous help in the total environmental picture.

G: Did Walter Washington have much input on that?

R: He had quite a lot, because he was then head of National Capital Housing. It was my suggestion that he get put on. Bird was very interested in public housing and improving the looks of it. She was dismayed when I took her on a tour of public housing, which I did at one time.

G: Tell us about that. Why did you do it, first of all?

R: Because I wanted her to see the problems of the city as well as its advantages.

G: Did you explain the purpose of it in advance?

R: Oh, yes. Whether I said I would like to show it to you or she said I want to see it is lost in the mist of time. But we did go, and I took her to one place that I had seen I guess a year before that was a kind of showplace. I took her to a variety. Fortunately there is only one highrise, and that's disaster. I took her to different places, and then I took her to this place, which had been good-looking a year before. And it was so awful-looking, so battered, it was depressing. I can remember her disappointment when I said, "Now we're going to see one that's good," and in a year's time it had deteriorated such that you couldn't believe.

G: Did this increase her interest in improving the public housing?

R: Well, I think she wanted to see what the problems were. She is a very bright and very careful person. If she is going to do something, she is going to know all about it. After I took her around, Walter Washington took her I'm sure a number of times afterward. It was through this Beautification Committee that they got to know each other, and she liked him very much.

G: How important was Mary Lasker on that [committee]?

R: She was important because she had money and ideas, too. She didn't know the city very well, but she came down from New York as a sort

fairy godmother and would underwrite great planting. She's a marvelous person. And of course she had done some planting in New York.

G: How about Carol Agger Fortas?

R: She was not too active on the committee. She was active in setting up the foundation, but I don't know whether she was on that Beautification Committee. She set up the Society for a More Beautiful Nation's Capital, the foundation that can accept money and is still in existence. I don't think she was ever on the beautification committee itself.

G: Did the committee do its own lobbying for legislation that they were interested in?

R: No, there wasn't any lobbying done. You see, this was the local committee, and then there was that big national meeting with conservation, preservation, and environmental groups coming from all over the country. There may have been some lobbying as a result of that, but I can't remember our Washington committee doing any lobbying.

G: You mentioned the housing projects and the problem with deterioration. Do you think there was sufficient emphasis on maintenance of beautification projects that had been started?

R: This was a great problem. This was first in Bird's mind. She always knew that maintenance was the big thing. It wasn't for want

of people knowing how important it was. Of course, a lot of it wasn't maintained.

G: Can you recall specific measures designed to upgrade maintenance or put more emphasis on maintenance?

R: Just by the kind of planting that would be done that would minimize the maintenance. When you realized that there wouldn't be the cash or the manpower to keep it going, you would put in a certain kind of thing that would have a better chance of survival.

G: Did the rioting impede the progress of beautification here, do you think?

R: Oh, the rioting impeded everything. But you see, by the time of the rioting that was '68 and that was when the President said he wasn't going to run any more. I can't remember what the Beautification Committee did after that.

G: Were many of the projects damaged during the rioting?

R: No.

G: Do you attribute that to their popularity in the black community?

R: I think some of it was so mindless that I wouldn't want to say. There was no deliberate destruction of them and no deliberate protection as far as I could see.

G: Was there an essential conflict, say, between the highway interests and the Beautification Committee that carried on?

R: The highway interests tried to use beautification to build more roads. I don't think they got away with it. But they would ask Lady Bird to

come and make a speech to the roadbuilders. I can remember her sending the speech to me to be sure that she wasn't being used by the highway people. Once up in Westchester County one of my friends said, "I'm afraid that Mrs. Johnson's beautification is being used to push through a highway here." So I wrote her or called her about it. Then when she was asked to talk to the road boys, she let me see her speech and make suggestions. Several times when this problem came up she asked me for suggestions.

G: In going out and making speeches around the country and promoting beautification, did this fit into political advantages at all; I mean, the fact that she was visible out in the provinces?

R: Oh, I would think so. I don't think that was her motivation, but certainly it helped.

G: Was she conscious of the political advantage of this?

R: She's conscious of everything. She's a very intelligent, perceptive person. But I think that both Johnsons felt that they were in a place where they could make real contributions to the country, and they were going to take advantage of every minute there to do things they thought were good for the country, Lady Bird as well as the President. You asked me the other day did I think the President was happiest in the Senate. I think right after his election in '64 when he felt he had been elected in his own right and there were so many things he could do for the country because he was the President, I would think that

that was the happiest time. And they felt they had the unique opportunity to make a contribution.

G: Did President Johnson attempt to influence these trips or suggest places that she might go?

R: I haven't any idea.

G: How about members of Congress? Did they have much influence on her trips to your knowledge? Did they try to get her to come to their districts?

R: I have no idea about that. My real knowledge of the beautification was Washington and not the national picture except when everybody came here.

G: Was the conference a success in your view?

R: I think so. I think it really did cheer conservationists and environmentalists and helped with the public support of subsequent environmental measures.

G: Was this the chief benefit, do you think?

R: As far as I can see.

G: Did it have other [benefits]?

R: It increased the public's awareness of what was at stake.

G: Do you think it did anything, as far as the committee itself was concerned, to redirect or direct them toward emphasizing one thing that they hadn't or another thing, to change directions or anything?

R: No.

G: Something in the files referred to the Speakers' Bureau for Beautification. Did you have any connection with that?

R: No.

G: Can you tell us anything about it?

R: No. I am not a speaker myself, and I don't hold up my hand when speakers are asked for. I don't know.

G: Do you think President Johnson viewed beautification with as much importance as Mrs. Johnson did? Was he as concerned about it as she was?

R: I think he was very interested in it; I'm sure he was. But this was her special job, and she gave it much more attention than he could have given it with all the other things he had to do.

G: I have felt from talking to people that knew her when she was young that this was something that might have been instilled in her when she was a little girl growing up in Karnack. Her Aunt Effie was quite a nature lover, as you know.

R: I think that probably that's true.

G: Has she ever talked about that to you?

R: No. I know that she has always liked natural beauty, but I can't think of any specific instances of her talking to me about it.

G: Is there anything else with regard to beautification or working with her that amplifies what we know about it?

R: I'll tell you one lovely little vignette. She and I took a walk one day.

She liked to walk and look at what was happening. She had a scarf over her head and dark glasses on and a big tweed coat so that she was quite anonymous-looking, and the Secret Service men were some distance behind us. We walked up the mall and we went to a triangle in front of the HEW Building where some azaleas were being planted. It was a Federal reservation, these were Parks Service men. And we knew because we were on the committee that the city of Norfolk [Virginia] had sent a number of azalea bushes to the city to be planted here. We saw them being put in, and Lady Bird said to one of the old gardeners, "Are those azaleas from Norfolk." He put down his shovel and he said, "How did you know? Are you girls from Norfolk?" Then one of the younger fellows behind recognized Lady Bird, and everybody laughed because there was the First Lady being called a girl from Norfolk. But she said, "No, we're both from Washington."

G: Is that right. He recognized her then, probably.

R: No, not until the people behind him told him after we had walked away. But she had answered and said, "No, we're both from Washington."

G: I have seen her in crowds of ordinary people, and she handles them so beautifully, gracious and yet dignified.

R: Oh, she's marvelous.

G: Do you recall any other examples?

R: I can't think of any other stories.

G: Was she comfortable around ordinary people, tourists?

R: She seemed to be, yes.

G: It seems that she has always had a basic shyness. Am I wrong in that?

R: Well, I think it's a reserve rather than a shyness. Maybe it's a shyness, too, but I would think of it in terms of being a reserved person. But I think that she certainly was never an overbearing, self-confident person like that. She had a reserve about her, but I think she felt comfortable in most situations from my observation of her.

G: Did she like making speeches, do you think?

R: I don't think so.

G: Did she put a lot of time into them, getting ready for them?

R: As far as I know.

G: What about writing letters? Did she get much help from you on this, or did she write her own letters?

R: Oh, she wrote her own letters. But this was during the campaign in '64 that I was talking about where the White House was just inundated with mail. It seemed a good idea to have some sort of acknowledgement and a much warmer way to acknowledge a letter if she signed it rather than just having an assistant to the President say, we have your letter.

G: Do you think there was ever any real consideration of Lyndon Johnson

not running for reelection in 1964?

R: I don't think so.

G: How about in '68? Do you think he early on had planned to run again?

R: I think so. Everybody has a different view of it. But Jim, my husband, who worked with him much more closely than I, certainly thought he was going to run. He would always say, "Why should I take all this abuse? I'm not going to run again." But that was a way of speech; people discounted it. I have heard him say that, but I didn't believe it.

G: Did you see him any in retirement?

R: No. Well I saw him when he came to town and there were parties. And then I saw him at the [LBJ] Library dedication, but that was all.

G: You never went down [to the ranch]?

R: No. I don't know whether Jim did or not.

G: I think you did go down to the ranch while he was President, after your husband's trip to Rome, didn't you?

R: Whether it was right after that or not [I don't know], we did go down together and had one of those great tours of the ranch. Of course he was just in his element there, and it was a great treat to be driving through the ranch with him and his knowing the first names of the deer as well as all the people working on the ranch. And calling one deer--I guess he called him Clarence. He would call Clarence, and Clarence would come over and we'd put cigarettes in his mouth. He liked to eat

cigarettes.

G: Sam Rayburn said one time, I understand, "Thank God Lyndon has that ranch. Now he has something else to talk about besides politics." Through the years that you knew him, did this have a diversifying effect on him?

R: Yes. He loved the ranch and did talk about it. But the thing that was a great treat was to visit the ranch and have him be the tour director taking us around and showing us everything about it.

G: I have heard that he was concerned with the most minute details.

R: Absolutely. He would see a fence that didn't look right, and he would get on that horn, that walkie-talkie or whatever it was in the car and say, "Where is so-and-so? This fence here needs a little attention."

G: Did he do much work while he was out there, to your knowledge? Was he still, say, on the telephone a lot?

R: Oh, he was on the telephone a lot. When we went down that time we met him at his office in Austin where he was working, and then we went out to the ranch together. He was on the phone from the station wagon to Washington.

G: Is there anything else that you would like to add that we haven't talked about?

R: I can't think of anything, Mike.

G: Any other reflections about him, his presidency, or how he might have changed through the years?

R: No. I think the thing that I said to you earlier, that he felt that he was in a position to do a great many good things for this country, is in essence the way I felt about him as President, that this was a tremendous opportunity.

G: He saw himself as an activist, I guess, in terms of legislation.

R: I guess he was.

G: Did he ever compare his presidency with, say, Franklin Roosevelt's or other people's?

R: No. He had reverence for Franklin Roosevelt and he spoke of him often, but not in comparing. At least, I can't remember it.

G: You don't think that he modeled his presidency after Roosevelt particularly?

R: Well, if he had a model it would have been Roosevelt, sure.

G: It occurs to me that [in] the parallel of Lyndon Johnson as Majority Leader and Lyndon Johnson as President, he saw himself in pretty much the same role only having more power to do the same thing. Of course, he didn't have a Republican administration in the White House, but [the parallel was in] being the chief legislator as he had before.

Well, I certainly thank you for your time.

R: Well, it's been a pleasure to me. If I dream up something more, I'll let you know.

G: Good. You can just add it to the transcript.

(End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview.)

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
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Gift of Personal Statement

By ELIZABETH ROWE

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

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Signed Elizabeth Rowe

Date March 18, 1976

Accepted Harry J. Middleton
Director, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library for Archivist of the United States

Date March 31, 1976