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A-373

Interview

with

EVA M. CLAYTON

May 30, 1995

by Joseph Mosnier

Indexed by Joseph Mosnier

The Southern Oral History Program  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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SOHP Series: The North Carolina Politics ProjectTAPE LOG

Interviewee: HON. EVA M. CLAYTON

Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier

Interview Date: 5/30/95

Location: Congresswoman Clayton's Congressional District Office, Warrenton, NC

Tape No.: 5.30.95-EC  
(approximate total length 80 minutes)

Topic: An oral history of Eva M. Clayton (D-N.C.), U.S. House, 1st Congressional District of North Carolina. Clayton and 12th District Representative Melvin Watt, both elected to the 103rd Congress in Nov. 1992, were the first African Americans elected to the U.S. House from North Carolina in the twentieth century. Born in Savannah, GA, in 1934, Clayton later graduated from Charlotte, NC's Johnson C. Smith University in 1955, married, moved first to Durham and then, in 1962, to Warrenton, NC. (Her husband, Theaoseus T. Clayton, the first black attorney to practice in Warren County, participated as counsel in a range of civil rights suits and twice ran in the 1960s for the NC House.) A brief chronology of her activities is as follows: Clayton was very active in civil rights causes, working during 1963-64 as a field organizer for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund's school desegregation program; in 1968, ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Congress in what was then the 2nd Congressional District; from 1969-71, was Executive Director of the Economic Development Corporation of Eastern North Carolina, which she founded; from 1973-77, served as Executive Director of the Soul City Foundation; from 1977-81, was Assistant Secretary for Community Development in the NC Dept. of Natural Resources and Community Development; in 1981, founded Technical Resources International, Ltd., a private consulting firm; from 1982-90, chaired the Warren County Board of Commissioners; and in 1992 and 1994 ran successfully for the U.S. Congress from the 1st Congressional District.

Substantively, the interview is organized around three major themes: (1) the evolution of black political activity in North Carolina since the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, (2) the re-emergence of the state Republican Party in these years, and (3) the increasing prominence of certain cultural issues in the state's politics in the same period. The interview proceeds through these matters in roughly chronological fashion; note that the last of these themes is treated in relatively abbreviated fashion due to expiration of allotted interview time.

See Also: For further discussion of Clayton's history see the SOHP interview of Clayton recorded 7/18/89 as part of the SOHP series "Notable North Carolinians" (a copy is on deposit at the Southern Historical Collection; Kathy Nasstrom was the interviewer).

Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

TAPE INDEXCounter Index   Topic

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side A -- Tape No. 5.30.95-EC]

- 001            [Opening announcement.]
- 005            [Interviewer sets out general themes to be explored in the interview.]
- 038            Her work in Warren Co. in the mid-1960s; voter registration efforts and attendant difficulties (resistance of white registrar, for example). Her husband runs twice for the NC legislature.
- 057            The North Carolina Voter Project in Warrenton. Vernon Jordan of the Southern Regional Council. Demographics of the 2nd District, and the relatively high potential fraction of minority voters if they can be registered.
- 073            Her 1968 candidacy for the United States Congress: a "catalytic" candidacy to encourage black voter registration. How she steps forward when the search for "a good man" does not produce a potential candidate.
- 102            The impact of her candidacy: encouraged increased minority registration and prompted many other persons to consider running for public office. She gains approximately 38% of the vote [running against Rep. L. H. Fountain].
- 115            Justice Department helped actively to assist minority voters to register in Warren Co.
- 129            Details of the 1968 campaign against long-time incumbent Rep. L. H. Fountain. The implicit messages of press coverage of her candidacy. Though Fountain did not race-bait in any overt way, "Race was factor, there's no doubt about that." Why even black citizens had difficulty conceiving that she might be successful in such a role.
- 165            Encouraged by Jean Fairfax [Director of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund Division of Legal Information and Community Services after 1964; based in New York City], she follows up her campaign by subsequently creating the Economic Development Corporation of Eastern North Carolina, so that she will have a vehicle to continue working on the underlying issues that motivated her campaign.
- 186            Further discussion of the 1968 election year, including the run for NC governor by Dr. Reginald Hawkins [African American dentist and civil rights activist in Charlotte, NC]. The plans for a campaign visit by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to eastern NC; King assassinated two days before the scheduled rally. Aftermath of the assassination: emotional, political, how the campaign went forward with a rally to honor Dr. King.
- 242            Reflections on the 1968 victory for NC House by Greensboro's Henry E. Frye, the first black member of the NC Legislature in the twentieth century. Years later

Frye swears in both Congresswoman Clayton and Congressman Mel Watt after their 1992 election victories.

- 260 The structure of black political leadership in NC in the late 1960s. Key persons and institutions in this context: State NAACP, attorneys, undertakers.
- 284 Role of the state's black leadership in the 1968 campaign. State NAACP concentrated on voter registration.
- 300 Relationship of key black leaders to the state's white power structure. John Wheeler of Durham was perceived as the "business leader" among NC's black citizens.
- 318 Reginald Hawkins' 1968 effort to challenge the seating of the NC delegation at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. She especially recalls civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer of Mississippi.
- 358 Subsequent NC state Democratic Party reforms.
- 365 She had little close contact to the state Democratic Party leadership in the late 1960s, her candidacy for Congress notwithstanding. In the early 1970s she was Chair of local Democratic Party and thus became a member of the Party's Executive Committee, but none of the Party's key leaders ever reached out to her in those years.
- 390 Role of women generally in the state Democratic Party was similar to her own: no one in the Party reached out to women in those years.
- 400 The Economic Development Corporation of Eastern NC, and the philosophy that guided her work as Executive Director of this organization [1969-71]. Goal was to support small local efforts, around the model of local day care centers, to provide important services to poor communities.
- 440 The 1972 elections and the aftermath for the state Democratic Party. Her focus at the time was largely on the question of whether the new Republican governor, Jim Holshouser, would support the Soul City Project, with which she and her husband were both actively involved. She paid relatively little attention in those days to Jesse Helms, for example.
- 483 Her work [1971-73] as Director of NC Health Manpower Development Program [see resume also].
- 502 Discussion of shifting voter loyalties in the 1970s. Some conservative Democrats begin to identify with the Republican Party.
- 535 Her work as Assistant Secretary for Community Development in the state Dept. of Economic Development and Community Development, under Secretary Howard Lee [the only black member of Gov. Jim Hunt's cabinet]. Uniqueness of her role: she was first African American woman in such a position in state history, and the burden of the attendant press scrutiny and the need to be above reproach.
- 628 Her views in the early 1970s on the prospects for continuing socio-economic advances for black North Carolinians. The rural-urban wealth disparity,

outmigration from rural areas, and Hunt's effort to encourage economic development in rural, particularly eastern, NC.

692 [End of Side A.]

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side B -- Tape No. 5.30.95-EC]

001 [Opening announcement.]

002 Discussion of her work in local politics in Warren Co. after 1980. Reagan's effort to cut support for social programs was a sharp departure from Carter, even from Nixon in many respects.

027 Necessity of strong leadership at the local level, particularly when the national government was reducing support. Warren Co.'s need for good leaders, but difficulty finding strong persons to serve.

042 Her emphasis [on the Warren Co. Commission] was enhancing and developing an economic base for the County. Successes in attracting new businesses, and the successful effort with a large school bond issue.

054 The Warren Co. Commission after 1982 had three minorities on a five-person Board, and she was chosen Chair immediately upon election to the Board in 1982. She had strong support and was able to move directly to implement her agenda.

065 Impact of 1984 elections in NC on the state Democratic Party. She was shocked that a popular Gov. like Jim Hunt could lose to Jesse Helms; people voted their "fear." Hunt was trying to move a state he well understood was quite conservative in a more progressive direction, but Helms spoke to the fears of the voters. "People would vote *against* someone more than they would vote *for* someone."

097 Jim Martin's election not so great a surprise; he's no Jesse Helms, and he's rather typical in his conservative politics, much like the traditional conservative Democrats.

110 The GOP's re-emergence in the 1980s. House Speaker Liston Ramsey's ouster, and the reasons for the coup.

155 Reflections on the development of a two-party situation in NC. The decreasing relevance of the traditional "party" structure to candidates, who no longer depend on the party for election as in the past.

169 Persons who earlier were conservative Democrats now identify as Republicans; why this may not be unhealthy. Suburbanites, and retirees to NC, have helped shift the tide in a conservative direction.

186 Most elections decided by a "twenty percent swing vote," largely independents.

208 Democracy may be better served by a true multi-party system; Democrats have an opportunity to revisit basic issues and decide what it is they stand for.

- 219 The significant, deep shift in prevalent political ideology. "When Newt Gingrich says he is about a revolution, he is dead serious. They're talking about changing the landscape of government and the role of government. We don't need any more government than we need, but we do need government."
- 246 She sees an opportunity for the Democratic Party to redefine itself in the current atmosphere.
- 255 The reasons she strongly supports redistricting that has created majority-minority districts. Explanation of the legal justifications for redistricting. The legal challenge to NC's 12th Congressional District [Rep. Mel Watt's district]. Why she rejects arguments that redistricting is unfair to whites.
- 390 [Last question: ERA, and more generally the fortunes of women in NC politics] The fight, at a critical juncture, to get NC to ratify the ERA. How the loss on this issue spurred further activism on such issues as comparable worth, and made women more determined to run for office.
- 440 [End of interview.]