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Interview

with

REGINALD A. HAWKINS

June 5, 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: REV. DR. REGINALD A. [ARMISTICE] HAWKINS

Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier

Interview Date: June 5, 1995 (approximately 2:00 pm through 4:00 pm)

Location: Rev. Dr. Hawkins' home, Charlotte, NC

Tape No.: 6.05.95-RH.1 and 6.05.95-RH.2 (two cassettes; Side B of cassette 2 is blank) (approximate total length 100 minutes)

Topic: An oral history of Rev. Dr. Reginald A. Hawkins, a dentist and an ordained Presbyterian minister who has been a leading African American civil rights activist in North Carolina from the late 1940s through the 1970s. Rev. Dr. Hawkins was born in Beaufort, NC, on Nov. 11, 1963; attended public schools in Beaufort; later received a B.S. from Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte and D.D.S. from Howard University; practiced dentistry in Charlotte beginning in 1948; was involved in numerous civil rights protests, suits, and other efforts in ensuing years; founded the influential Mecklenburg Organization on Political Affairs in 1957; was first black person ever to run for governor in NC, taking 20% of the vote in the 1968 Democratic primary, and a similar figure in 1972; recipient of numerous honors and awards for his work in civil rights, religion, and dentistry. Having retired during the 1980s from his dental practice, Rev. Dr. Hawkins is recently retired from the ministry and resides in Charlotte, NC.

Substantively, the interview is organized around the following broad 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. Because of Rev. Dr. Hawkins' role as a key black political leader, emphasis is given to developments in black politics since the late 1940s, when he first became active in civil rights matters.

See Also: Rev. Dr. Hawkins' papers, and various other recordings and materials related to Hawkins, are deposited with Special Collections, J. Murrey Atkins Library, Univ. of North Carolina at Charlotte.

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

TAPE INDEX

Counter Index    Topic

[Cassette 1 of 2, Side A -- Tape No. 6.05.95-RH.1]

- 001 [Opening announcement.]
- 016 [Interviewer sets out topics for discussion.]
- 049 Basic biographical sketch. Educational history, college and dental school. D.D.S. from Howard 1948, M. Div. from Johnson C. Smith University in 1956. Suggests the range of honors he has received.
- 076 Sketch of Charlotte in 1948: "all-encompassing Chamber of Commerce that dictated to black folk what they wanted them to do." Black vote controlled through use of "ward heelers" who were bought off with small amounts of cash. His perspective was shaped by earlier contact with key civil rights figures at Howard University, who encouraged him to demand civil and political rights. NC Dental Society discriminated; he filed suit to desegregate the Society. Meanwhile, the NAACP had difficulty attracting members because blacks feared economic and other retaliation. Charlotte was a "hostile, segregated town, run by the bankers and industrialists."
- 097 He immediately becomes "persona non grata" when he links up with state NAACP leader and Charlotte black leader Kelly M. Alexander Sr. to press civil rights concerns.
- 108 When Korean War breaks out, a resentful white Dental Society arranges to have him declared "essential" to the war effort so that he would be called up for service. He serves 1951-53, spending all of his time at Fort Bragg in NC.
- 119 Immediately upon returning to Charlotte in 1953, he and others conduct "the first sit-in" at a segregated restaurant at the newly-opened airport in Charlotte. They succeed, and move on to other challenges, including school desegregation, particularly after *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954; but the state soon passes the Pearsall Plan [so-called pupil placement law to delay desegregation].
- 140 In 1957, he organizes the Mecklenburg Organization on Political Affairs (MOPA), in part because the NAACP could not openly engage in partisan activity but also because he favored more forceful civil rights protest. MOPA becomes quite effective; it soon effectively controls the black vote in Charlotte. MOPA enjoys reputation for integrity.
- 163 Until MOPA, there was no effective local black political organization. Chamber of Commerce exploited the black community, manipulated its vote but offered nothing in return. After MOPA, the black community began to wield some influence, and achieved some successes in influencing elections. The Democratic Party was fought, since it did not want to work with blacks.
- 184 Details of state NAACP and its head, Kelly Alexander [a Charlotte funeral home director]. Largely the NAACP did not push forcefully in civil rights, except by filing suits; no direct action.
- 198 Sit-ins in Charlotte; earlier school protests, and his efforts to create an organization to support student protestors, particularly since the courts were very hard on black student protestors.
- 218 His role in the segregation efforts in the early 1960s: he was the key leader, and through MOPA and other efforts they outmaneuvered the Chamber of Commerce

and won important gains. Women were key supporters in MOPA. "We persevered," "and we broke Charlotte down." No matter what some say, "nothing happened in Charlotte unless we forced it" (i.e., the white power structure in Charlotte never willingly conceded ground on civil rights, its relatively progressive reputation notwithstanding).

- 238 His relationship to the white power structure: "they hated my guts," because "they couldn't buy me, they couldn't use me." "They were all racists. ...Even today they hate my guts." Despite the official history per the view of the Charlotte Observer and other establishment institutions, nothing was won without a struggle. Over the years Hawkins is involved in no fewer than nineteen different suits related to civil rights [including several in which he was accused of various improprieties by whites as retaliation for his forceful civil rights activism].
- 258 His voter registration work. For Johnson in 1964, his group registered 16,000 new black voters in six weeks. Charges brought against Hawkins for alleged registration irregularities, he says, were politically motivated; he had to go all the way to the state Supreme Court to prevail. His work in Charlotte had important impact on way the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was shaped. His home in bombed in 1965.
- 300 Further description of the charges brought by local officials alleging improprieties in voter registration; whites were afraid of increasing black political power.
- 320 MOPA coordinated the local voter registration efforts. Funding and support came from the Voter Education Project in Atlanta, CORE, and the AFL-CIO.
- 346 His political differences with some black leaders, including Fred Alexander, who was "an Uncle Tom" who did not serve black interests. Kelly Alexander had his heart in the right place, but he was rather timid as a leader, one who did not favor direct action as did Hawkins.
- 385 His contacts to the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, and later with Nixon and Terry Sanford. His contacts with certain very helpful whites.
- 417 In mid-1960s, the United Presbyterian Church supports Hawkins in attending seminars to prepare him for statewide political leadership. His ties to numerous civil rights groups, all of which supported him in this effort. The growing hope that he might become a viable statewide candidate. His ties to black leaders in NC and his success in gaining their support.
- 448 How it was that he came to run for governor. He was a "lightening rod" for organizing blacks statewide; this effort was his "ministry," and he was supported by the United Presbyterian Church in traveling the state to make contacts and build support.
- 468 Organizing the campaign for governor in 1968. Campaign director was Jim Ferguson [a young black attorney in the Julius Chambers firm]. Charges brought by white dentists against Hawkins for allegedly faulty dental work actually created an opportunity for him to discuss the civil rights context and the struggle. The support he received from black academics and others in NC.
- 518 Despite the legacy of racism, he wins 20% of the primary vote in 1968. He helped expose the hypocrisy of NC's claim of racial liberalism.

- 528 Response of state Democratic Party to his candidacy: "They were scared, because we had just come out of the sit-ins, and then Martin was murdered...." Dan Moore, then the governor, was "scared as hell" and "didn't know what to do with us." "We meant business; and black folk -- I haven't seen it since" were highly organized and turning out to vote for him. The Democratic Party claimed to be liberal, but was torn over civil rights; and it did not embrace Hawkins and what his candidacy represented. They attempted to destroy him: tapped his phone, and so forth, but they couldn't defeat Hawkins' spirit.
- 581 His ties to Martin Luther King, dating back to the 1950s. King came to Raleigh in 1961, and SNCC [Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee] was formed. Hawkins had close ties to King, who was assassinated on the eve of a planned campaign visit to NC on Hawkins' behalf.
- 618 Sacrifices of persons in the movement. "The power structure will never love me, because of what we made them do." But "you can't re-do history," so the record will in time be told truthfully.
- 651 How money was raised for the campaign: "preaching, begging." How clergy helped Hawkins' campaign. Notes that all successful black civil rights leaders were clergy. He later personally covered a \$40,000 debt from the campaign.
- 698 [End of Side A.]

[Cassette 1 of 2, Side B -- Tape No. 6.05.95-RH.1]

- 001 [Opening announcement.]
- 003 Relations with the 1968 gubernatorial victor, Bob Scott. Good relationship with Scott, who set up the North Carolina Democratic Party Study Commission to explore Democratic Party reforms in NC. Hawkins was co-chair; a young Jim Hunt was the secretary. Goals were to find new roles for blacks and women in the Party; reforms followed in the form of new vice-chair positions reserved for blacks and women.
- 028 The challenge to the NC Democratic Party delegation to the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, which Hawkins led to contest the Party's tokenism. Details of the challenge, and its successful outcome. Hawkins notes that his record over time was one of multiple successes, prompting much retaliation in a racist society.
- 065 How the deal was cut in Chicago between Democratic Party hierarchy and Hawkins' group. State Democratic Party leaders did not want the embarrassment of a floor fight at the national convention.
- 080 Howard Lee in 1970 becomes Second Vice Chair of the NC Democratic Party; Hawkins was offered but turned down the position, and instead directed that they choose Lee.

- 089 Other black candidates who ran in 1968: Eva Clayton, Henry Frye. Hawkins' gubernatorial race helped carry these local campaigns forward.
- 107 How he felt after the 1968 race: "I felt good." He was then an "integrationist," and the race showed that blacks could control the balance of power.
- 113 His ties starting in 1960 to Floyd McKissick in Durham and later after 1968 to the Soul City project. The evolution of the plans for Soul City, and key persons involved in the effort.
- 156 Now that McKissick is dead, Hawkins is the only remaining living member of the small group who first worked statewide for black gains.
- 158 His views on integrationism vs. black power. His conviction that economic power is necessary: "you can't make it in this country as a beggar." He started preaching black power in 1972, and that's when the white power structure got more nervous still about Hawkins.
- 177 The key themes of his 1972 campaign, including black power themes and the call for economic gains for blacks.
- 186 How Hawkins, after again finishing third in the Democratic primary with approx. 20% of the vote, effectively moves his support to the Republican candidate Jim Holshouser in the 1972 gubernatorial race after Democratic candidate Skipper Bowles tries to undercut Hawkins. Hawkins made it acceptable for Holshouser to campaign in black communities, and Holshouser later gets 30% of the black vote in the general election.
- 208 Hawkins showed that he was not in the pocket of the Democratic Party, and that he would not stand to be double-crossed.
- 215 The state Democratic Party after 1972: under Jim Hunt's leadership, the Party declines. Hawkins thinks little of Hunt, who in his view "tries to be all things to all people" and ends up being a weak leader.
- 238 The 1972 race is the last campaign for elective office for Hawkins.
- 240 Harvey Gantt's emergence in Charlotte in the 1970s. How Gantt, and also Melvin Watt, can't relate successfully to everyday blacks, and how as a consequence they don't support Gantt and Watt with great enthusiasm. Gantt was made, Hawkins says, by whites, not by blacks. Gantt's failure to build contacts to "everyday blacks;" Hawkins hopes he's wrong, but thinks this will again explain Gantt's failure should he run again for U.S. Senate in 1996.
- 287 Black political leadership in NC in the mid-1970s: placated, bought off by whites. This has been true ever since.
- 307 Mel Watt is an "upperclass black"; Eva Clayton, Frank Ballance, Jim Richardson are "entirely different."
- 324 As a result of black leadership becoming middle-class and divorced from ties to poor blacks, the latter have suffered greatly since no one represents them.



- 336 The role of black women: "they were tops; without black women, we wouldn't have been anywhere." Black women carried the load of most of the movement; they held key posts in MOPA, in part because they did not feel so economically or personally vulnerable as many black men.
- 362 On ERA: Hawkins certainly supports equal rights for women, but he sees race as a bigger issue for blacks to solve first. ERA was a much greater concern for middle-class white women than for black women, who had first to face the burden of race.
- 398 How the issue of race was so central to the state's political shifts in the 1980s, as racist Democrats have shifted to the Republican Party where anti-black politics were again respectable. Elected leaders like Sue Myrick have a "Ku Klux Klan mentality."
- 452 How Hawkins has failed to convince current black political leaders like Dan Blue and Harvey Gantt [that accepting support from certain whites has meant that they will not be able to represent poor blacks?]
- 458 The Hunt-Helms race in 1984: Race was the central factor. Hunt was identified with the Democratic Party and thus with civil rights, and as a consequence Helms exploited the race issue to win the election, just as he did in 1990 with Harvey Gantt. "Race [racism] in North Carolina is just as North Carolina as apple pie. NC is the most hypocritical state in the United States."
- 478 Ongoing discrimination through the University of North Carolina system. How his 1972 campaign platform ultimately was adopted in large measure -- but with no credit to Hawkins.
- 488 Thoughts on former governor Jim Martin: "the most innocuous white they could find and control...." How the white business and industrial elite use politicians like Martin and Sue Myrick. The state lacks forceful, independent leadership throughout its politics, given the influence of the economic elite.
- 522 The 1989 Joe Mavretic coup to claim the Speakership from Liston Ramsey.
- 547 Hawkins' optimism for 1996, when he expects blacks, women, and other minorities to reject current GOP politics.
- 562 On Dan Blue: one of his proteges, but Blue is someone who has 'lost contact with his roots' since he's middle-class.
- 580 NC completely lacks effectively black leadership at the grassroots level. The older generation of civil rights leaders has given way to a "bourgeois" class of current black leaders.
- 609 Eva Clayton as an important grassroots leader with ties to poor, rural blacks. Hawkins' role in her political career.
- 630 Cultural issues are a sham: "they say welfare cheats where they used to say nigger." "Their morality [that of many of the Christian right] is hate." The religious right is mostly poor whites who are susceptible to racist appeals because they feel anxious and vulnerable themselves; "it all boils down to race."

699 [End of Side B.]

[Cassette 2 of 2, Side A -- Tape No. 6.05.95-RH.2]

001 [Opening announcement.]

003 The UNC-HEW lawsuit, ca. 1970-77. His 1968 platform included adopting a Board of Governors, and this came to pass. Julius Chambers went on the Board in 1970 over Hawkins' protest, since Chambers' would then be unable to push forcefully an outsider.

027 Redistricting: perhaps it would be better to return to the old arrangement, when all political leaders had to pay some attention to black concerns; as it stands, many white candidates now feel they have no obligation to blacks whatever. Blacks might be better off acting as the balance of power, influencing all candidates. As it stands, blacks "are isolated."

059 Further thoughts on why Democrats may do well in 1996, if Clinton will "kick butt" and act as a forceful political leader [Hawkins told Clinton this when they golfed together last summer; I know of this meeting from the earlier interview I did for my dissertation].

073 Current black leaders in NC, who are not closely tied generally to poor blacks.

088 Key white political leaders include the CEO's of the state's huge banks: Hugh McColl of NationsBank, Ed Crutchfield of First Union, John Medlin of Wachovia Bank.

098 Hawkins may produce an autobiography at some point.

101 [End of interview.]